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DUMBLETON COMMON.

BY

THE HON^{BLE} ELEANOR EDEN.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



LONDON:

RICHARD BENTLEY, NEW BURLINGTON STREET.

1867.



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ALFRED TENNYSON,
This Little Story
IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED,
IN MEMORY
OF MANY HAPPY HOURS
PASSED IN HIS COMPANY
BY
THE AUTHOR.



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DUMBLETON COMMON.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

“Let the strict tale of graver mortals be
A long, exact, and serious comedy;
In every scene some moral let it teach,
And if it can, at once, both please and preach,
Let *mine* an innocent, gay farce appear.”

POPE.

I WAS born in the parish of Dumbleton, and there I have lived ever since, and I don't suppose that anybody knows the history of the place and that of its inhabitants, better than I do.

For three or four generations past, the Lamberts have been the leading solicitors of Dumbleton, and have managed the affairs of almost everybody who has affairs worth managing; and without wishing to boast, I believe I may truly say that the Lamberts have gained the confidence, respect, and esteem of all classes.

Tom, my eldest brother, is now the representative of the reigning house of Lambert—my second brother having taken to another line of business, as I shall have the honour of explaining to you presently—so Tom and I live together in the old house adjoining his office; and a very pleasant, comfortable old house it is too, in its own stiff, old-fashioned way.

It is not like one of these new villas they run up now-a-days, with walls an inch thick and all over stucco, which turns brown, and

peels off, within a twelvemonth. I am thankful to say our house is of good, substantial, solid, red brick, with real stone copings, and a handsome stone porch over the front door, with a flight of steps leading up to it, and a paved walk below that, with elaborately worked iron-gates at the end of it; and on each side of this walk, and all up the steps, we place, in summer, great pots of scarlet geraniums and blue agapanthus, which gives the place, to my mind, a very bright and cheerful appearance. But, of course, that is quite a matter of taste.

Inside the house we have a spacious front hall paved in squares of black and white marble just like a chess-board on a large scale, and into this hall open our principal dwelling rooms—the drawing-room, dining-room, Tom's study, and a little room, which, in our primitive manner, we call "the front

parlour." In this parlour window, which is built out in a bow, I have my sofa, and there I spend most of my time, reading and knitting and looking out of the window alternately. Ever since I first met with the accident that made me a cripple for life, I have been in the habit of sitting or lying in this bow-window, and watching the people go by—

“As up and down the people go”—

up the hill to the Common and down the hill to the town. I often think my window must be rather like the glass of the Lady of Shalott—

“And moving through a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear—
There she sees the highway dear
 Winding down to Camelot.
There the river eddy whirls,
And the red cloaks of market girls
 Pass onwards from Shalott.”

There's pretty sure to be always somebody passing, and it is very seldom that anybody goes by, without looking up to give me a nod and a smile, for our Dumbleton people are good, kind-hearted creatures, and they all know "little Miss Patty" will be on the look out for them.

The station has been built of late years, just between our house and the town, so that about nine or ten o'clock of a morning, I see plenty of company, for all our gentlemen from the Common will be just bustling off to catch the first express to London; and then again I always like to be in my place between five and six in the afternoon, to see them come leisurely back. I can frequently tell how things are going on in the City, by the faces I see coming from the train; but if anything very wonderful should have occurred I generally have the

first intelligence of it, for some kind friend or another is sure to look in and tell me the news, or leave an evening paper at the gate for me. So, as I said before, I don't suppose there is any body who can tell you more about Dumbleton and the Dumbletonians than I can.

We sick people who have nothing better to do than to sit still and look on at life, as if we were in our own private box at the theatre, and all the rest of the world were merely actors and actresses, acting a series of plays for our amusement, contrive to see a good many little things that the players themselves are too busy to notice much. I have been watching the Dumbleton stage very attentively through my opera glasses for many years past, and I have seen a good many plays acted there in my time, sometimes pantomimes, sometimes comedies, often tra-

gedies and even melodramas. When I was a very little child, my nurse let me fall out of her arms, over our wide, old-fashioned stair-case into the hall below. They thought at first I was killed, but I had only injured my spine ; so that I did not die, but lived to be a poor, little, sickly, deformed object ; a lame, hunchbacked, little woman, but a very cheerful, happy, little woman for all that—and now this is all I am going to tell you about myself. I don't mean to be the heroine of my own story. No ! no ! I must find you somebody young and pretty for that, or you won't think it worth reading, I know very well.

But I must just say a few words about my two brothers. Tom is the dearest, kindest, and most benevolent old bachelor that ever lived upon this earth. I hardly know how it was that he never married—I

sometimes fancy it was a good deal on my account—Tom did not like me to be turned adrift in the world, to take care of myself; and though, to my certain knowledge, there were plenty of ladies in Dumbleton who would have snapped at the chance of marrying him, I don't much think Tom ever gave them the option. If he ever fell in love with any of them, he never told me anything about it and a more affectionate and devoted brother than Tom has been to me, ever since my accident, it is impossible to imagine.

My second brother, James, is quite a different kind of man—not but what James is always most kind and attentive to me—but James's first object in life, from the time he was quite a lad, has been money making. With this object in view he declined to enter his father's office, saying he

was fitted for something better than to plod on, all his life, in an attorney's office in a small country town. James was determined to make a name for himself in the world, and a fortune too.

After some delay and much discussion, James ended by going off to Australia as soon as he was one-and-twenty, with an enterprising Scotchman of the name of Hope, who held large contracts under government at Sydney, and who wanted just such a sharp, pushing young man as my brother James, for his assistant.

Mr. Hope made a very good thing of his government contracts ; and, after a time, he raised James to the rank of junior partner in the business. We now hoped that my brother would have come home. My father was getting to be an old man, and longed to see his youngest son once more. But

James was too much engaged in his favourite pursuit, to consider his father's wishes, and the poor old man died, without ever bidding him farewell. There was another reason, why I was anxious that James should return to England. When he left Dumbleton he was engaged to my particular friend and constant companion, Margaret Beaumont; and one of James's ostensible reasons for wishing to make money was, that he might be able to fulfil this engagement and marry Margaret. But year after year went by and James wrote but seldom, and then his letters were cold and unsatisfactory.

In the eagerness of his race for wealth, James had apparently forgotten the prize which he had once held out to himself as the reward of his labour.

After a time, Mr. Hope died, leaving a young widow and a little girl to the care of

his partner. James was so scrupulous in attending to his friend's last bequest, that at the end of another year, he had married Mrs. Hope, and adopted her child as his own.

When James had been away about ten or twelve years, he really did come home, having gained a very considerable fortune by his marriage, as well as by his business. He did not give up his usual occupation, however, but became a very busy and influential man in the city—passing his time in investing his own and his stepdaughter's money to the best advantage, and earning a good income by being a director of numerous large and thriving companies, who gladly paid him for the use of his name, and for the benefit of his advice and experience in the management of their affairs.

At the death of old Mr. Pybus, my brother

was chosen as chairman of the "Proserpine Iron Company" in Dumbleton, and then James took up his residence on the Common, and built for himself a very handsome and luxurious abode, which he called Contango Abbey. Contango Abbey was a Gothic structure, "replete," as the house agents say, "with every comfort and convenience requisite for a nobleman's family." It was situated on the highest and best part of the Common, and commanded an extensive view of the surrounding country, which was intersected by a river and a couple of railroads in almost parallel lines, and was bounded on the horizon by a dense haze of fog and smoke, which presented to the unsophisticated mind of a stranger a very inadequate idea of the glories of the distant metropolis.

I am not one of those people who hold with the old Scotch proverb, that "Blude is

thicker than water," and I never feel bound to consider a person the height of perfection, just because they happen to be in some degree related to myself. On the contrary, I prefer, as a general rule, the friends of my own choice, to the relations who have been in a measure forced upon me by circumstances. Therefore, I never pretended to be excessively attached to my brother James, though, having been a successful man, and a wealthy man, he was much looked up to and respected by all who knew him.

For, as we have all found, ever since King David's time, "so long as thou doest good unto thyself, men will speak well of thee;" and James certainly did such very substantial "good unto himself," that I can answer for it that there was not a single creature in all Dumbleton who could find a word to say against him; and so James "counted

himself a happy man," though I cannot say I ever envied him myself.

James's wife was a fine-looking woman—tall, stout, fair, and certainly handsome in the Elizabethan style (or perhaps I should rather say in the style of Queen Elizabeth, to whose portraits my sister-in-law bore a striking resemblance). I often thought the likeness was more than skin deep, for Eliza was every whit as vain, as selfish, as jealous, and as capricious, as our glorious old Queen Bess herself of blessed memory.

When first she came to England, Eliza took the line of professing immense affection for James and his family, and was always trying to prove to us how deeply my brother was devoted to her, and to her child. She evidently had intended us to follow suit, and to fall down before her, and worship her as the presiding Deity of the whole family.

But somehow, or another (I hardly know why it was), I never took to Eliza as perhaps I ought to have done.

She would try to patronise me, and I am not fond of being patronised, and so I rebelled, and Eliza did not like that, and altogether we did not quite what is called "hit it off," together. I remember so well our first meeting—Tom and I had gone down to the front door of the Red Holm to welcome my brother and his family to Dumbleton.

James seemed delighted to see us again, and introduced his wife to me as my "new sister Eliza."

She held out her hand to me in a condescending manner as we entered our little drawing-room, saying—"Ah! you will, I trust, find it a great comfort, Miss Lambert, to have a sister to look after you, and take

care of you. I have often heard my dear husband speak of you. He prepared me for your appearance. James is always so thoughtful for *me*. Yours is a sad affliction, no doubt; but we shall endeavour to do all in our power to make you comfortable, and I hope when we are settled, you will come and visit us whenever you please. I know James wishes it, and I shall be glad to do everything in my power for my husband's family. It will give me sincere pleasure, Martha, to be of use to you, I can assure you."

I thanked her—rather coldly, I fear—for I had been accustomed to take care of myself for so many years, that I did not like to be treated as utterly helpless; and I had already so many kind friends in Dumbleton, that I did not think my sister-in-law's patronage of any very great importance to my future happiness.

“I never had an aunt before,” said little Sydney, coming up and giving me a gentle kiss. “Will you be my Aunt Patty, as Papa said you would?”

I embraced the dear child warmly, and promised to be to her the most tender and dutiful of aunts.

James looked pleased, and patted Sydney’s head affectionately.

“Is it not delightful to see how fond he is of my child?” observed Eliza, in a stage aside to Tom. “But your brother is a dear, kind man—a more attentive husband never lived; and you know this is not my first experience of married life,” she added in an affected voice. “But you all receive me so kindly—I declare I feel quite overcome. I am so afraid dear James has prepared you for something very superior. I know James’s kind partiality to me, and I am sadly afraid

that, where I and my little daughter are concerned, your brother is not quite to be trusted. I warned him not to say too much about me. I hope, you naughty man, that you have not been disobeying my orders ;” and Eliza put on an air of pretty playfulness, and patted James’s arm, and looked up in his face with what she evidently thought an irresistibly charming manner.

But my brother, instead of responding to this little demonstration of conjugal affection, looked bored, I thought, and even, perhaps, a little ashamed, and turned the conversation rather abruptly, by asking if it were not dinner time ; and remarking, that as he was very hungry after his journey, he thought Eliza might as well take off her bonnet and wash her hands at once. I, taking the hint, ushered my sister-in-law to her room, and cut short her protestations and apologies

rather sooner than she quite liked, I suspect ; but Eliza and I have never been very cordial from that moment.

Her little daughter, Sydney, however, was one of the prettiest and most engaging children I ever beheld. She was about twelve years old, when first she came to England, and she soon became as great a favourite of Tom's and mine as she already was of her step-father's.

There was no resisting little Sydney's winning, childish ways. I fear we all joined in petting and indulging her in the most shameful manner, but she was so simple and innocent, and so loving and warm-hearted, that we quite doted upon her.

If she had been a niece of our own, I am sure Tom and I could not have loved her better ; and Sydney was never more happy than when she came to spend the day at the

Red Holm with "Uncle Tom" and "Aunt Patty."

As she grew to years of discretion, Sydney improved in beauty, and at eighteen, she was everything that the heroine of a novel ought to be. She had a tall, but slight and graceful figure ; a dazzling complexion ; eyes of "heavenly blue ;" and the correct profusion of silken hair, "mingled with threads of gold;" which, as you are well aware, are all essential qualifications of a really well-appointed heroine of modern times.

Besides all this, Sydney had a pleasant, hearty manner, and was simple and unaffected, indeed, still almost child-like in her way of talking. I am afraid I must add that she was terribly impulsive, and that she generally said whatever came first into her mind, without stopping to calculate the

probable consequence of her words ; and this habit not unfrequently led her into trouble, as will herein-after appear. Sydney, moreover, was not only a beauty, but an heiress, for her father had left a considerable fortune, of which she was to take possession either when she came of age, or on her marriage. Her mother's jointure was also to revert to Sydney at her death, and my brother James having no family of his own, was not unlikely to leave his step-daughter the bulk of his own property. I really don't know, therefore, that I should be able to find in all Dumbleton a more suitable heroine for my little story, than my niece (as I always call her,) Sydney Hope.

CHAPTER II.

DUMBLETON AND THE CLERGY.

“ ‘ Describe the borough ;’ though our idle tribe
May love description, can we so describe,
That you shall fairly streets and buildings trace,
And all that gives distinction to a place ?
This cannot be ; yet, moved by your request
A part I paint—let fancy form the rest ;
Cities and towns, the various haunts of men
Require the pencil, they defy the pen.”

CRABBE.

BUT having now given you an outline of our family history, I must tell you something about Dumbleton.

Dumbleton is a good-sized town, and

there are some things in it, that would be well worthy of your attention, the first time you pass that way. The Town-hall, for instance, and the Market-house beneath it; the new drinking fountain; the old Parish Church, and the pretty new Church on the Common.

Our Common is famous for its fine, healthy situation, and is surrounded by beautiful villas, which are inhabited, for the most part, by very wealthy gentlemen, who, like my brother James, have business in the City.

But I am forgetting that by far the best account of Dumbleton is to be met with in Bidgood's "Guide to Dumbleton and its Vicinity." Bidgood is our principal bookseller, and is quite a man of literary pretension, from having compiled this little book, which has been pronounced by the

“*Dumbleton Mercury*” to be “one of the most useful and compendious publications of the day.”

I see, on referring to Bidgood’s Guide, that he begins by saying :—

“ The ancient borough town of Dumbleton is situated on the river Dumble, from which it derives its name. It stands in a picturesque and salubrious part of the country, has a population of 10,000 inhabitants ; is represented in Parliament by one member ; boasts a weekly market and an annual fair, and is justly celebrated for its fine scenery, fine air, fine women, and fine ales.”

Bidgood also remarks that “ Dumbleton offers many advantages as a place of residence to those persons whose occupation compels them to remain for the greater part of the year in the neighbourhood of London, the great R—— line affording great facility

for hourly communication with every part of the metropolis." Of course there is no denying all this. Nothing can be more true; but as Bidgood's style of writing appears to me to be a little stilted, I will quote no more from his work.

We have two excellent hotels in Dumbleton. The "Peacock," down in the Market-place, and the "Alexandra," on the Common. If you were to ask my advice, I should say decidedly go to the "Peacock;" but I may be prejudiced in favour of good Mrs. Phillpotts, whom I have known all my life; for the "Alexandra" only belongs to a Joint Stock Company (limited) of doubtful solvency, in which I am unable to take any interest whatever. But to return to the subject of Dumbleton—I ought not to omit some mention of our churches, and of our clergymen, who are of the utmost impor-

tance in our consideration—indeed we ladies think and talk of little else than the respective merits of our three churches and our four clergymen.

To begin with the old parish church, which is large, dark, ugly, and inconvenient. It was built in the reign of Edward VI., partially destroyed by fire during the Commonwealth, and rebuilt in the time of Queen Anne; (*vide* “Bidgood’s Guide to Dumbleton”). It stands in the very centre of the town, where it is so blocked in by modern streets and houses, that it is scarcely visible, till you find yourself actually in the churchyard, which is a kind of public thoroughfare from one end of the town to the other.

St. Anne’s is a hideous structure outside, consisting of a short, dumpy, grey tower, (part of the original edifice) joined on to a huge, red-brick body. The interior, however,

is thoroughly comfortable and homely; every family of any consideration in the parish may be accommodated with an excellent, roomy, square pew, full of snug corners, well-stuffed cushions, and provided with thick curtains of crimson baize, which can be drawn all round to keep off the draughts of cold air, or the prying eyes of the congregation.

The living of Dumbleton being in the gift of the Earl of Cleveden, he naturally presented it to his second son, Berresford Broke.

Our young vicar is a popular man for several reasons—the first of which is, perhaps, that we consider him to be “every inch a gentleman.” Mr. Broke is always liberal, just, straightforward, and honourable in his dealings with his parishioners; his sermons are plain, and very much to the point, and though I have no doubt we have

heard the same thing very often before, still we always fancy we hear something worth listening to, when the Vicar is in the pulpit.

In old Dr. Westcott's time, the church was never so full as it is now; and though he was a very pious old gentleman, and we all considered him as infallible as the Pope of Rome himself, still I should not say he was so popular a man altogether as our present Vicar—the Honourable and Reverend Berresford Broke.

Mrs. Broke was a Miss Marsham, the third daughter of General and Lady Emily Marsham (quite fashionable people in London); and though I believe they did not consider it a very good match for their daughter, they gave their consent with a tolerably good grace, as Lord Clevedon has better livings than Dumbleton at his disposal, and his elder son, Lord Templecombe,

was not at that time married. Mrs. Berresford Broke, when first she came to Dumbleton, was young, pretty, and good-natured; and as she dressed well, and gave herself no airs whatever, she soon became very popular among the Dumbleton ladies.

The Brokes are generally supposed to be in a state of painful indigence, and compared with some of our rich City men on the Common, no doubt their income may appear a small one. Still, I can never help thinking that Lady Emily Marsham exaggerates matters a little, when she talks about her poor child being "an actual pauper," or a "perfect beggar." For after all, there is no such very great harm in being a pauper in a pretty little Parsonage house, with a nice garden, a basket pony carriage, three maids, and an odd man. Neither is it any terrible hardship to be a beggar, when the alms

consist of game of all kinds, fruit, hot-house flowers, and other luxuries of the same description. It is fortunate that the Brokes seem to take a delight in being petted and patronised by their rich neighbours, for I am sure their parishioners take an equal pleasure in ministering to their comfort. If the Brokes are asked to dinner, it is quite a matter of course, that a carriage shall be sent to fetch them and take them home again; and should Mrs. Broke express a desire to go to town, half a dozen ladies—my sister-in-law at their head—will think it quite an honour to offer their services, and to set her down at the General's door in Grosvenor Square, and call for her again in the course of a few hours. So that, in fact, we feel no very serious apprehensions about the state of our Vicar's finances; and it is always pleasant to feel that any little attention we

can show Mr. Broke, or his wife, is sure to be gratefully received. To tell you the honest truth, I believe we consider the obligation to be all on our side.

Eliza, in particular, is never so happy as when she is able to do some little service for her dear Mrs. Berresford Broke. My sister-in-law loves to patronise, and of course to be able to patronise a lady of much higher rank than her own, adds immensely to the pleasure of the thing.

Mr. Broke keeps a curate—a young man fresh from College—who assists him at the parish church, and a very excellent young man, I am sure, Mr. Hatfield is. A fine, strong, active, hearty young man, who can do a hard day's work in the parish, and enjoy a game of cricket on the Common in the evening, as much as any school-boy in the place. It is a real pleasure to me to watch

Mr. Hatfield go by, whistling to himself, and followed by a bevy of his favourite scholars, who all seem to look upon him more as a friend and a playfellow of their own standing, than as a reverend gentleman of some authority in the parish ; and I don't dislike his sermons a bit the more on that account.

The beautiful little church of S. Monica, on the Common, was built by old Mrs. Honour Verney, of the Manor House, who also endowed it and presented it to the son of an old friend of the Verney family. Mr. Wilfred Auriol is a young man of very decidedly High Church tendencies, and intones the service ; has a small procession of little boys in surplices, and habitually uses "Hymns, ancient and modern," which is by some of our Dumbleton people, looked upon as one of the seven deadly sins, though I never can quite understand why.

Nevertheless, S. Monica's is very well attended. Many of the townspeople go up to the new church of a Sunday evening, particularly those young persons who happen to be "keeping company." They say it is for the sake of the singing, but my own belief is, that it is not so much the singing, as the pleasure of the walk home in the dark afterwards, that drags them all the way up that hill.

For my part I have nothing to say against Mr. Auriol, who is, I have every reason to believe, a very well-meaning, conscientious person; he certainly does not spare himself, for he has "matins and vespers" every day of his life, and it quite grieves me to see him look so pale and thin, poor fellow.

He coughs too, sadly at times, though he does wear a beard (to protect his throat and chest, as I understand), which is, of course, not what we have been accustomed to, from

Dr. Westcott. Still, if poor Mr. Auriol derives any benefit from the warmth of his beard, it is not for us to object to it, in any way, although I would gladly have knitted him any number of comforters if he had preferred them.

Mr. Auriol resides in a little villa, near his church, with his mother and sister, and a very peevish, fractious old lady is old Mrs. Auriol. She suffers much from rheumatism, and is apt to grow particularly snappish whenever a rheumatic attack is impending. I think she must be rather trying to live with, but Wilfred, who loves to make a martyr of himself, and no doubt, looks upon his mother's temper as a cross, bears her petty tyrannies most patiently, I must confess. As for Agnes Auriol, his sister, she is next door to an angel, and is one of my particular favourites.

She is a really good, sensible, praiseworthy girl, and, though she never misses one of her brother's little daily services, she works hard in the parish besides, and is as good as another curate to Mr. Broke. I always do think (though, of course, it is no business of mine,) what a charming wife Agnes would make for Mr. Hatfield, and I have every reason to suspect that Mr. Hatfield perfectly agrees with me.

The third church is quite at the further end of the town, down by the river side.

It was got up chiefly out of opposition to S. Monica's; but, as money sufficient to build a real church could not be raised, an iron church was bought, all in little bits, like a child's toy, and then put together, and stuck up upon a waste piece of ground among all the wharves and factories, where, I dare say, it does a vast deal of good.

Bartholomew's, as it is called, is not an ornamental erection certainly, but it is a light, cheerful, roomy place enough inside, with comfortable cane chairs placed on a bit of bright-green drugget at the upper end of the building, like a sort of reserved seats for the richer members of the congregation, single ladies, tradespeople, and so forth, who cannot afford a whole pew at the parish church, but still like to have a sitting of their own at Bartholomew's; and there are plenty of neat, painted, deal benches, with some cocoa-nut matting foot-paths between them, for the second class worshippers, which strikes me as a remarkably convenient and economical arrangement, and something quite out of the common way; only it makes the chapel look a little like a concert-room, I hear; but I never go to Bartholomew's myself, as I am used to my own parish

church, and never stay away from it, if I can help it.

The Rev. Nicholas Kibble officiates at the Iron Church. He upholds the extreme evangelical views, and is much looked up to by a certain set in Dumbleton, who accuse Mr. Auriol of "popish practices," and who give out that the Vicar does not "preach the Gospel," and has "dangerous tendencies." What they consist of, I am sure I can't imagine, for a more harmless, good-natured young man than Mr. Broke never existed.

But Mr. Kibble finds "an extensive sphere open to him," as he calls it, at that end of the town, and I am sure there is plenty of good to be done in Dumbleton by persons of all ways of thinking. Mr. Kibble is not a talented man by any means ; indeed as he often says of himself, he "possesses

more grace than gifts." But though he never had the advantages of a university education, he got ordained somehow, and he certainly fell upon his feet when he came to Dumbleton, at the request of Mrs. Pybus of Proserpine Hall, and was eventually married to her niece. Miss Parkins was a daughter of the rich tobacconist on the Common, who gave her a fortune of fifty thousand pounds, and who, as long as he lived, took great pleasure in placing many little comforts and luxuries at the disposal of the ever increasing demands of the young Kibble family.

But while I am on the subject of the clergy I must not forget to mention Mrs. Pybus, of Proserpine Hall; the rich widow of the late Zachery Pybus, formerly Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Proserpine Iron Company. Mrs. Pybus is the most important person in the parish

(at all events, in her own estimation). She was the prime instigator of the Iron Church movement, and is still the strenuous supporter of Mr. Kibble and evangelical principles in Dumbleton.

Mrs. Pybus is, by mutual consent, considered as the great authority at all our ladies' committees and charitable institutions, and we all look up to her opinion with considerable respect, and even awe.

She takes likewise a very lively interest in the temperance society ; and I remember being present at a meeting on that subject which she once convened at Proserpine Hall, and to which she summoned all the ladies of Dumbleton, "for the purpose of taking into consideration the necessity of an enquiry into the amount of spirituous liquors consumed by the washerwomen of Dumbleton, and to propose that a ladies' committee

should at once be formed for the suppression of this alarming and increasing form of vice."

So ran the circular (lithographed from Mrs. Pybus's own autograph letter) which was sent round to us all on this momentous occasion.

CHAPTER III.

A LADIES' COMMITTEE.

“Whoever keeps an open ear,
For tattlers, will be sure to hear
The trumpet of contention ;
Aspersions are the babblers' trade,
To listen, is to lend him aid,
And rush into dissension.”

COWPER.

As no better opportunity of finding all the principal ladies of Dumbleton assembled together in solemn conclave, is likely to present itself, I will take the liberty of acting as your “special correspondent” on the occasion, and

will give you a report of the meeting from an "eye witness." At the head of the large, mahogany dining-table—which was covered by a handsome, red cloth, bound with black velvet—sat Mrs. Pybus herself; she having, as a matter of course, taken the chair. Before her were placed a large blotting book, and a massive silver inkstand.

Supporting her, on either side, were her faithful allies and habitual secretaries, the Misses Wolff.

Sapientia Wolff, the elder sister, had at one period of her life visited some relatives in New York, and had come back thoroughly imbued with grand and stirring notions about the "Rights of Women," the "Employment of Females," and "Sanitary Reform." Miss S. Wolff was also an authoress, and was constantly engaged in preparing papers for scientific journals on one, or other

of her favourite subjects. She was moreover by no means averse to reading one of her little "Papers" aloud (if very much pressed to do so,) and it was very confidently reported among her particular friends, that should Sapiientia be required upon an emergency to address an overflowing assembly of ladies and gentlemen at a public meeting, or, say even a "social science congress," that that lady would find herself at no loss whatever, but would acquit herself with remarkable ease and fluency.

Miss Amelia Wolff was by no means so clever as her elder sister. She was a young person of florid complexion and enthusiastic temperament, but of a more modest and retiring disposition than Sapiientia.

Amelia was blessed with great talent for collecting subscriptions—not that she was by any means avaricious, or parsimonious—

quite the contrary ; but it was a genuine gratification to her to obtain money on any pretence whatever, no matter how trivial the sum so gained, or how uninteresting the object for which it was destined. Nothing in this way came amiss to Amelia Wolff, whether it was a penny collection, as a testimonial from his parishioners to a departing curate, or a five guinea subscription among the ladies of Dumbleton for a wedding present to some member of the Royal Family ; it was all one to Amelia, as long as she was employed in raising funds on some pretext or another. If she could find no excuse for asking for actual money, Amelia solaced herself by canvassing for votes for some destitute orphan, or idiot, or incurable patient ; and by taking a list of subscribers to these charities, and going regularly through them alphabetically, with a touching appeal

for a few penny stamps, or some worn-out clothing, if no votes were forthcoming, she managed to fill up most of her time in a manner highly satisfactory to herself.

Amelia naturally met with many rebuffs, but these she bore with heroism worthy of a better cause, and she was occasionally rewarded by a short note from some lady or gentleman of philanthropic disposition, who desired to make further enquiries into the merits of some particular case, and a short correspondence had in some instances ensued which had, for the time being, set Amelia upon a perfect pinnacle of self-glorification.

The rest of the company consisted of Mrs. Berresford Broke, who never shone much on these occasions, or took any very active part in the discussion of such subjects. There was also Mrs. Duckett, the brewer's wife, whose husband happened that year to

be Mayor of Dumbleton; and there was Margaret Beaumont. Mrs. Auriol never entered Mrs. Pybus's house, though she allowed her daughter to be present; but Mrs. Kibble was there, of course, and in the background sat Mrs. Roberts and Miss Wyburd, two elderly ladies of quiet and retired habits, who seldom entered into society except for charitable purposes.

Mrs. White, the doctor's wife, who thought it went against her husband's interests to refuse Mrs. Pybus's invitation, my sister-in-law, Sydney Hope, and myself, made up the party.

"We are now assembled, ladies," began Mrs. Pybus in her fine sonorous voice, "to discuss a matter which seems to me to be not unworthy of your most serious consideration."

Here Mrs. Pybus paused, and consulted

through her gold eye-glasses a list of those washerwomen who were under suspicion.

"I believe, ladies," she continued, "that when you hear of the fearful proportion of victims who have succumbed to this terrible vice, your hearts will thrill with horror and disgust, and that you will be unable to rest till you have devised some scheme for putting a stop to this degrading and lamentable state of things. Ladies," added Mrs. Pybus in her most impressive manner, "I have to lay before you the awful fact, that out of the one hundred and sixty women who find employment in washing linen in this parish, no less a proportion (on the average) than seventy-five, are *known* to be addicted to habits of intemperance!"

"Hear! Hear!" exclaimed Miss Wolff, looking round triumphantly, as if Mrs. Py-

bus had just imparted to the company some extremely delightful intelligence.

“ Well ! I am sure it’s all very shocking indeed,” said old Mrs. Duckett, who as Mayoress of Dumbleton was entitled to speak first ; “ but do you know, my dear Mrs. Pybus, I don’t believe the poor things can get through their work without a little something just to keep up their strength.”

“ I know,” said Mrs. James Lambert, “ that if I don’t have my glass of port wine regularly at eleven o’clock, I am ready to drop before luncheon time. I tell James I can’t do without it, and he always gets me the very best old port that is to be had in London.”

“ The doctor tells me,” said Mrs. White, nervously, “ that he considers half a pint of good porter would do the poor women more good than the bad gin they generally drink.”

“Yes, indeed, and I have no doubt he is quite right,” resumed Mrs. Duckett; “nice wholesome, unadulterated stout, such as we make, can hurt nobody; and Duckett, I am sure, would let them have it at a most reasonable price.”

“Ah!” answered Eliza, “I never can touch malt liquor of any kind. I consider porter heavy, bilious kind of stuff—only fit for navvies, or bargemen. I am sure, Mrs. White, Dr. White will tell you that good, old, port wine is the only thing that suits my constitution.”

“But you must bear in mind that these poor washerwomen we are talking of, cannot very well afford good, old, port wine,” said Margaret Beaumont, giving a comical glance at me in my dark corner.

“Ladies, we are wandering from the point in question completely,” said Mrs.

Pybus, with some asperity. "May I trouble you to listen to a report which Miss Wolff has kindly drawn up at my request. Miss Wolff, will you have the goodness to begin?"

"I don't believe she knows anything about the matter, and I daresay there's not one word of truth in it all, from beginning to end," whispered Sydney Hope to her friend Mrs. Broke, who laughed and nodded acquiescence very readily.

"May I request silence for a *few* moments, young ladies?" said our chairwoman sternly. "I will not detain you long."

"Pray proceed, Miss Wolff; I am sure you will not be *again* interrupted."

Miss Wolff, nothing loath, instantly sprang to her feet, and began a lengthy and abstruse paper on the evils of drunkenness, and the advantages of total abstinence, more especially as regards the female sex, concluding

with a reference to the habits of washer-women in general, and Dumbleton washer-women in particular. It was, I have no doubt, a very able production, as Mrs. Pybus seemed to think so ; but I fear Miss Wolff's audience did not for the most part appreciate the discourse as they should have done, for they yawned, and looked more bored than was at all proper under the circumstances.

" You hear, ladies, Miss Wolff's ideas on this all important subject," said Mrs. Pybus, when the report was at length concluded ; " and now pray tell us what do you propose that we should do in such an emergency ? "

" I should be rather inclined to advise the poor women to undertake no more work than they feel quite equal to, without resorting to the support of stimulants," said Mrs. Berresford Broke, feeling it incumbent on her, as the Vicar's wife, to give an opinion

of some sort, but not having any very lucid ideas on the matter in question.

“And if they *do* feel themselves obliged to take something, I should really advise them to try our porter,” added Mrs. Duckett. “Duckett could let them have it in very small casks from the brewery, you know; and then there would be no occasion for them to be always running to the public-houses. I’ll talk to him about it as soon as I go home.”

“I think that would be a very kind thing to do,” observed Miss Beaumont. “I hope Mr. Duckett will consent.” A chorus of applause ensued.

“But as I have just mentioned to you,” interposed Miss Wolff, tapping the table with her roll of MS. in a manner expressive of some irritation, “I consider the use of *any* stimulant most injurious to the female constitution.”

“Or the male constitution either, I take it, from what the Doctor tells me,” said Mrs. White, seizing the advantage of a pause; “if not taken—that is, of course, in due moderation.”

“We are not, I think, speaking of men, but of washerwomen,” retorted Miss Wolff, angrily. “I was observing, when Mrs. White interrupted me, that the habitual use of intoxicating liquors ultimately destroys the female constitution. I believe,” she added with some show of sarcasm, “that even Mrs. White will allow that washerwomen are usually females.”

“Yet I can assure you, ma’am—although perhaps you will hardly believe me—that in India our clothes were invariably washed by men,” said Mrs. Roberts, who was the widow of an Indian civilian, and had resided much in that country.

“ We are now, I imagine, in Dumbleton,” answered the aggravated Sapientia; “ and here, I suppose, our clothes are washed by females.”

“ But their husbands very often turn the mangles though, Miss Wolff,” said Mrs. Duckett, with a little touch of malice. “ I was only passing Mrs. Fletcher’s door yesterday morning, and I saw Joe turning the mangle with my own eyes, and very hot and thirsty he looked, poor fellow, I must confess.”

“ Dear ladies,” cried our chairwoman, coming to the rescue of her ally; “ are we met here this day, for the purpose of discouraging intemperance, or of advocating it? for really the arguments made use of by some of you, would incline a stranger to believe that we were taking the latter course.”

“ Why, I am sure I don’t mean to say it

is right for a man to drink more than is good for him, or a woman either, for the matter of that," said good, old, blundering Mrs. Duckett, not the least disturbed by Mrs. Pybus's ironical remarks. "I merely thought poor Joe Fletcher looked hot and red in the face, and he complained of feeling so dry, that if I had happened to have my purse in my pocket, I dare say I should have given him the price of a pot of beer."

"And because your friend happens to be a drunken brute of a man," said Miss Wolff indignantly, "is that any reason why the whole female population of Dumbleton should be encouraged in the same odious vice?"

"But Joe Fletcher is not a drunken brute," persisted the obtuse old lady; "he has worked in our garden for years, you know, and we consider him a particularly steady, civil-spoken man; and his wife, who

always washes for us, is a good, sober woman. I never heard of her being tipsy in my life —never.”

These remarks were treated with all the contempt they deserved, and Miss Wolff rose to propose a resolution, which was seconded by Mrs. Kibble, to the effect that a committee should be formed for the purpose of enquiring into the subject more minutely, and that a report should be laid before the meeting on that day fortnight.

Meanwhile, Miss Wolff undertook, at Mrs. Kibble's request, to prepare a little tract, or pamphlet, upon the ill effects produced on the female constitution by the unguarded use of spirituous liquors; and it was determined that if this pamphlet should meet the approbation of the committee, that several hundred copies should be immediately struck

off for general distribution in the parish of Dumbleton.

After this, the meeting was virtually adjourned.

CHAPTER IV.

GOSSIP.

“Talk without truth is like the hollow brass; talk without love is like the tinkling cymbal; and where it does tinkle, it jingles; and where it does not jingle, it jars.”—MRS. JAMESON’S COMMON PLACE BOOK.

I SAY virtually, because no sooner had Mrs. Pybus vacated the “chair,” and Miss Wolff put away her papers in a very business-like looking, black leather bag, than the rest of the ladies, feeling themselves at liberty to converse as discursively as they pleased, without any danger of being called to order, began

to chatter away, like a set of jackdaws on an old church steeple.

“ Well ! thank goodness ! all this nonsense is over for to-day,” exclaimed Sydney in a low voice to Mrs. Broke, almost before the last awful echoes of Mrs. Pybus’s powerful tones had died away ; “ and now let us talk about something else ! I don’t care a straw whether the washerwomen drink gin, or porter, but Selina, dear, *have* you been to call on Lady Venetia Verney yet ? of course you knew her before ; you have lived so much in London, that you know everybody ; but at all events, as the Vicar’s wife, you would be sure to call at the Manor House. Do tell me all about them. There are two ladies, are there not ? Has Lady Venetia a daughter ? ”

“ Ah ! dear Mrs. Broke ! ” added Eliza, “ do tell us all about them ; you are sure to

know what is the right thing to be done. I wish to show Lady Venetia every attention, but I have lived so little in England, that I don't know whether I ought to call first. Is there not some rule about the lady of highest rank making the first advances? and yet, how is her Ladyship to know 'who is who' in Dumbleton? We have not all got our histories written down in little red books that you can buy for half-a-crown, like the nobility, you know; have we? or else, I have no doubt, Lady Venetia would be pleased to see me. Sir Robert being the Colonial Secretary, we might be able to give him much useful information, and we should be most happy to make acquaintance with the Verneys, I am sure."

"But if the young lady is not her daughter, who is she then? and who is the gentleman who is not Sir Robert? Is he engaged to

the young lady? He is always walking in the garden with Lady Venetia—which I should not allow if I were the young lady—that is, I mean, if he were engaged to *me*,” said Sydney, with a little toss of her head, that reminded me of her mother.

“Ah! do tell us all about them, Mrs. Broke,” asked Miss Wyburd. “Mrs. Roberts and myself go nowhere and see no one, of course; and we must depend upon you for all our information.”

“Yes, indeed, we saw the carriage pass our house,” added Mrs. Roberts, “but we know nothing whatever about the Verneys, and a little information is always agreeable.”

“Mr. White was sent for last night to attend one of the housemaids at the Manor,” remarked Mrs. White; “but he saw none of the family, except the footman, who opened the door, and the housekeeper, who took him upstairs.”

“I should really be glad to know,” said Mrs. Pybus, “what Lady Venetia Verney is to us, that we should make this to-do about her. Why should we excite ourselves about the affairs of a Lady Venetia Verney? Reflect for one moment, ladies, and just ask yourselves the question—Why?”

“Well! to be sure! we all know very well that Lady Venetia Verney is a great lady in London,” said good Mrs. Duckett, “and gives parties, and is put in all the papers, almost every time she goes out, and we are not, you know, Mrs. Pybus; and so we naturally feel a little curiosity to hear what great ladies are like, when they are at home—not that I should think, for a moment, of taking the liberty to call on her Ladyship; but if anybody else does call, I don’t deny that I shall enjoy hearing all about it. Just how her Ladyship looked,

you know, and what she wore, and what she said, and how many servants she keeps, and all the rest of it. I really can't tell you why, Mrs. Pybus, but you see, it makes a pleasant little change for us all at Dumbleton, to have some fresh faces in the place. We know all about each other by this time, don't we? and we know nothing about Lady Venetia Verney, except just what they put in the papers, and which I dare say is not half of it true. So Mrs. Broke, my dear, if you should chance to see her Ladyship, which I dare say you will, being in the same class of society (which I don't pretend to be myself), do look round, will you? and take pity upon a poor, silly, curious, old woman, and tell me all you can; for I don't suppose I shall ever go to the Manor myself."

"And pray, Mrs. Duckett, why should you *not* call at the Manor yourself and

satisfy your own curiosity, if you feel any desire to do so?" demanded Mrs. Pybus, scornfully. "For my part I cannot understand what you find to be curious about. Who is my Lady Venetia Verney, I should like to know, that she should give herself these airs and graces? Let me tell my Lady Venetia Verney that I think no more of her than I do of any Mrs. Brown, or Mrs. Smith in the place. If her Ladyship must needs come to Dumbleton, she must make up her mind to be treated like any other person who chooses to take up her residence on the Common. No fine London ladies here, if you please, Mrs. Duckett. I warn you, at once, that I intend to ignore all class distinctions here. If my Lady Venetia cannot put up with our homely, old-fashioned ways, let her keep herself to herself, and be as exclusive and ridiculous as ladies in her rank of life

invariably are ; so far as I have had any experience of them." Having delivered herself of this sweeping condemnation, Mrs. Pybus snorted violently several times, like a restive horse, and after looking round for approbation, finally fixed her eye in a threatening manner on Mrs. Berresford Broke, to whom she harboured a secret dislike, and at whom, indeed, much of her speech was levelled.

"I remember writing a note to Lady Venetia Verney some years ago," observed Miss Amelia Wolff, after an awkward silence, which nobody else had the courage to break ; "I asked for her vote on behalf of that poor idiot child of Widow Hall's ; but she favoured me with no reply whatever, and the child soon after died, so that I was never able to get it into the asylum after all. I shall certainly venture to remind her Lady-

ship of the case, as she may think it only right, under the circumstances, to send a trifle to old Widow Hall, to console her for her sad bereavement."

"Well ! now, I must say, I do think the greatest blessing that ever happened to Martha Hall, was the death of that poor afflicted child," said Mrs. Duckett. "She has been much better off, ever since she lost it, you know, Miss Amelia, and she can go out to work now, which she never could do as long as it was alive."

"Ah ! Mrs. Duckett, but you quite seem to ignore the fact, that if I had only been fortunate enough to get it into the asylum, the child might have been taught some trade, and have lived to prove a source of great gain to the poor woman ; and what is more, I shall take care to let Lady Venetia know, that such is my unbiassed opinion."

“Mr. Kibble will no doubt represent the case strongly to Lady Venetia,” added Mrs. Kibble. “I believe Mr. Kibble intends to call very shortly at the Manor, and try to interest her Ladyship in our poor district. Widow Hall, you are aware, belongs to *us*.”

“For my part,” said Miss Sapientia Wolff in a would-be careless tone, “I shall hope to obtain an interview with Sir Robert before long. I mean to forward to him a copy of my pamphlet on the Marriage and Divorce Act; and if Sir Robert will grant me a private interview, I shall have no hesitation in calling his attention very seriously to the disgraceful injustice to which married women are at present subjected—they are, in fact, NON-EXISTENT!! and I shall impress this very strongly on Sir Robert’s mind. I have some idea of calling my paper ‘The Non-

Existence of Married Women.' I suppose few ladies have gone more thoroughly into the subject than I have ; and if Sir Robert is inclined to take the matter up warmly, I believe he would find my services of no small value to him, in preparing a Bill to bring before Parliament next session. I expect to get many hundred signatures to a petition which I propose to place in Sir Robert's hands for presentation next year."

"Well ! It's very kind of you, Miss Wolff, to take so much trouble, I'm sure," said Mrs. Duckett ; "for you don't seem very likely to be married yourself now, and even if you do, I hope and trust you don't mean to go and get divorced again directly ; but as for not existing, I beg your pardon there. I can assure you, my dear Miss Wolff, I find that I manage to make out a very comfortable

existence, though I *am* a married woman. Poor dear Duckett would soon find out the difference if I ceased to exist, I fancy. Indeed, I believe he'd consider it about the worst misfortune that ever happened to him in the whole course of his life. Duckett considers my existence every bit as important as his own, and that's the honest truth, I'll answer for it."

"I must candidly own I agree entirely with Mrs. Duckett, Miss Wolff," said Eliza. "I, you know, have had some little experience in these matters ; and I really cannot complain that I have ever found the slightest difficulty in preserving the right of existence. I have always met with the utmost respect and consideration, both from my late husband, poor Mr. Hope, and also from my present husband, Mr. James Lambert ; and my sister-in-law, Martha Lambert,

will bear witness, that I invariably mention James Lambert as the best and kindest of men, both before his face and behind his back ; don't I, Martha ? and indeed, if I did not, I should be a base, ungrateful wretch, for James's attentions to me are really quite affecting ; are they not, Martha ?" Here Eliza dropped a tear on her new lilac bonnet ribbons as an incontrovertible testimony to James's merits as a husband.

Miss Wolff looked a little disconcerted at this repulse. " You misunderstand me completely, my dear madam," she said ; " I intended no allusion to Mr. James Lambert. I have no doubt whatever that Mr. James Lambert is a most worthy, kind-hearted, excellent man, and I dare say, he does his duty in every capacity to the best of his abilities. I was not referring either to Mr. Lambert, or to Mr. Duckett. I was merely

stating a fact, which appears to me to be quite unanswerable, namely, that in the eye of the law, every married woman is ‘NON-EXISTENT.’ Now this is a most serious consideration, ladies, as you will all own, I am sure, when once you see it in its proper light. In a free country like England, such a state of things as this, should not be allowed to continue for another hour. I consider it a disgrace to the age in which we live, that it should have continued for so long already ; but I am determined to do all that lies in my power, to put an end to this crying evil ; and circulars stating my views and intentions will shortly be sent to all the principal ladies of Great Britain, inviting their cordial co-operation in this great work. I hope to secure many names in Dumbleton to begin with—and Lady Venetia Verney’s at their head.”

“I hope, Miss Wolff, you don’t mean to ask *me* to sign your petition,” said Mrs. Broke, looking alarmed; “because I am almost sure Berresford would not like it; and I never sign papers, or anything of that sort, without asking Berresford about it first; and I really don’t see so very much use, after all, in a married woman having any existence. One’s husband is always so sure to manage everything for one, whether one exists or not, so it don’t much signify.”

“Mr. Kibble is quite an advocate for the equality of the sexes, I know,” said Mrs. Kibble, who always made a point of opposing Mrs. Broke upon every possible occasion. “Mr. Kibble would have no objection whatever to my signing any number of petitions. In fact, he has so much to do in his district, and in preparing his sermons, that I never trouble him by asking him any

such needless, or trivial questions. Mr. Kibble never interferes with my arrangements in any way, and I never dream of consulting him about our little household regulations."

"Dear me! don't you indeed?" inquired Mrs. Broke anxiously. "Why I never so much as order dinner without asking Berresford first, what he would like to have; and as for the bills, I don't even know what two and two make, so Berresford always does the weekly accounts for me. I tried it one week, but made such a shocking failure of it, that Berresford has taken them in hand ever since. And then the servants, you know—I never could scold the servants myself. They would burst out laughing in my face, I feel convinced, if I attempted it. Berresford undertakes all that sort of thing. I could not get on at all without him."

“ Indeed ! so I have heard,” replied Mrs. Kibble with some contempt. “ I could hardly believe it possible, I own, but as you assert it yourself, Mrs. Broke, we are compelled to take it for granted that such is the case.”

“ Oh ! there’s no doubt about the matter, I can assure you, Mrs. Kibble ; and you are quite at liberty to repeat it on my authority as often as you like. I am the most helpless, indolent creature in the world, I should think ; but Berresford fortunately does not seem to mind much about that, and he rather enjoys keeping up all his bachelor habits. Now do you know he won’t even trust me to make the tea ! Berresford can’t touch his tea if I make it, he says, so he always does it himself now ; and you know it saves such an amount of trouble. It’s the greatest comfort in the world when one’s

husband thinks he has a talent for house-keeping; but with our small income, we should be ruined in a week if I attempted it, I am sure."

CHAPTER V.

DUMBLETON MANOR HOUSE.

“In various talk th’ instructive hours they pass,
Who gave the ball, or paid the visit last,
One speaks the glory of the British Queen ;
And one describes a charming Indian screen,
A third interprets motions, looks and sighs,
At every word, a reputation dies.”

POPE.

“OH ! You dear, little, idle, naughty thing !”
exclaimed Eliza tenderly. “Are you not
ashamed of yourself to talk in that shocking
way ? and set us all such a bad example.
Come, let me take you home to luncheon

directly. It's getting quite late. My carriage has been waiting this half-hour."

"Thanks, dear Mrs. Lambert, you are so kind to me always. I don't know what I should do without you; but Berresford will be expecting me home, and we are to go and call at the Manor House this afternoon."

"Oh! but we will stop at the Vicarage and leave word that you are with me, and Mr. Broke can come and fetch you on his way to the Manor. He must pass our gate, or perhaps he will come up to luncheon with us now."

"Well, we'll go and ask him then. You will be sure to have all sorts of delicious things for luncheon; and I dare say, we have only got some cold beef at home. It's Monday, you know, and we always have cold beef on Mondays. It does Berresford so much good to be fed up. He requires a

good deal of nourishment, poor fellow ! and you see on our income, we can't afford anything but the plainest possible fare, so I shall run in, if you will let me, and tell Berresford you insist on his coming back to luncheon with you directly ; and then the maids can eat up all the cold beef for their supper ; and that will be such a blessing for us, won't it ?”

As in duty bound, we all laughed heartily at this artless sally on the part of our Vicar's wife, with the exception of Mrs. Pybus, who never laughed ; Mrs. Kibble, who regarded such frivolity “ more in sorrow than in anger,” and Miss Sapientia Wolff, who was too much occupied in making a rough draught of her proposed circular to listen to what we were talking about.

“ Good-bye, then,” said Mrs. Broke ; “ I hope, Miss Patty, I am not depriving you

of your place in dear, kind Mrs. Lambert's carriage."

"Oh! dear, no!" answered Eliza quickly. "Martha has her own conveyance; her donkey-chaise is at the door, I have no doubt."

"Yes, indeed, my patient old Jenny must have been waiting for me this long time," said I.

"Ah! What a nice, darling old thing your Jenny is! I always admire her so," said Mrs. Broke. "She is so handsome and sleek, and your little chair looks so smooth and comfortable. My basket is terribly rough, do you know. I have a great mind to ask you to lend me your dear old Jenny some day, when you are not thinking of going out yourself. I am sure your donkey chair must have some peculiar kind of springs to make it look so easy and com-

fortable. Now confess, has it not? I shall never rest till I have found out the secret; and then I shall ask Mr. Thomas Lambert if he can't exchange my basket for a chair just like yours—only then I don't know what poor Berresford would do. He might walk beside me though, could not he? and I could drive Romeo myself. Charming!"

I felt quite flattered and gratified at this admiration of my little donkey-chair, and promised to send Jenny to the Vicarage the very next day for approval.

"Good day, Mrs. Pybus! a delightful meeting, I am sure. It has all gone off beautifully. I shall tell Berresford all about it, you may depend upon it. I think he will approve highly of Mrs. Duckett's suggestion of letting the poor things have some nice little pretty casks of porter of their own. I hope, Mrs. Duckett, *I* am to be allowed a

little cask too ; I should so like it. Do tell good Mr. Duckett I am dying for a tiny cask—all for my own private use.”

“ I am sure, my dear, you shall have one directly if you like it,” said Mrs. Duckett, looking delighted. “ I shall tell Duckett to send one round at once. He will be quite pleased to do so, I’ll answer for him.”

“ Well, Miss Wolff,” continued Mrs. Broke, “ I shall not forget to mention to Berresford what you say, about signing a paper to petition Parliament for an existence, but I am afraid he won’t let me have anything to do with it. I am, indeed ! so I can hold out no hopes whatever of *my* name. Men are such shocking tyrants—are they not, Mrs. Lambert ? You and I know all about it, don’t we ? We are not like that comfortable, independent Miss Wolff, who can go about where she likes,

and do just as she pleases from morning to night. No ! we poor married women cannot answer for ourselves in any way—can we ? It's such a dreadful bore ! I declare I quite envy Miss Wolff at times. I shall tell Berresford I want to be just like Miss Wolff, and have an existence of my own. By-the-bye, Miss Auriol, Berresford gave me strict orders to ask you and Mr. Auriol to come and drink tea at the Vicarage this evening. He wants to talk over something, or other with your brother and Mr. Hatfield, and he desired me to say that he considers you quite as one of the curates, so you are to be sure and come too. I wish we could afford to give dinners. It would be so nice ; but as we can't, you must be contented with a cup of tea and some brown bread and butter—that's all we have to offer you. I am so sorry—and now I must go ; I am keeping

poor Mrs. Lambert waiting all this time. Too bad of me, is not it?" And Mrs. Broke tripped out of the room, followed by quite a little chorus of applause.

"What a delightful person is Mrs. Broke," observed Mrs. White. "As the Doctor always says, it does one good to see her."

"She has a good heart," said Margaret Beaumont. "It is impossible not to like her."

"Oh! quite! She is so thoroughly kind and amiable," added Agnes Auriol.

"Yes! I am sure it's quite a pleasure to do anything for dear Mrs. Broke. So affable! and such pretty manners! not a bit of pride about her!" remarked Mrs. Duckett. "There's nothing I would not do, either for her or the Vicar."

"I quite agree with you, Mrs. Duckett," said I. "She is welcome to my donkey-

chair any day, I am sure, poor thing! I dare say her little carriage shakes her to pieces."

"She is, indeed, a sweet creature—I quite love her," continued Mrs. Roberts.

"I esteem it a privilege to have the pleasure of her acquaintance," said Miss Wyburd. "It does one good—as Mrs. White and our excellent doctor justly observe—to know so charming a couple as our Vicar and his amiable lady."

"Poor little fool! She will awaken one of these days from her delusion, and see her 'Berresford,' as she calls him, in his true light," muttered Miss Wolff grimly.

"They are children of the earth—earthly," said Mrs. Pybus, with a gesture of disgust; "mere dust! worms!! poor sinful worms!!! nothing more. Ah! how little we know ourselves."

“A light, frivolous, thoughtless young person,” pronounced Mrs. Kibble. “Sad to see one in her responsible position, so utterly without ballast. Poor thing!”

With these sentiments the assembly broke up, and we dispersed to our respective homes, greatly edified by the whole proceeding. But I am forgetting that all this time you are left in total ignorance as to the history of these Verneys, whose arrival in Dumbleton caused so great an excitement in our little community.

Sir Robert Verney, Bart., K.C.B., who has done us the honour of representing our interests in Parliament for many a long year, is Lord of the Manor of Dumbleton. The Common, in point of fact, belongs to him, and the old Manor House on the Common was formerly the residence of the Verney family. It was, for many years, inhabited

by a very old lady, an aunt of Sir Robert's ; the same Mrs. Honour Verney, who had built and endowed S. Monica's Church, and who was a great benefactor to the parish in various ways. Old Mrs. Honour Verney died about a year before the epoch, at which my story commences, at the advanced age of ninety-two ; and now, that the Manor House was once more at Sir Robert's disposal, it was rumoured that he intended to use it, as a villa residence during the ensuing summer months.

This was grand news for Dumbleton, for Sir Robert was one of the most active and influential members of Her Majesty's government ; and we justly felt very proud of our member. But to say nothing of his being a distinguished public man, one of Sir Robert's greatest merits in our eyes, was that of being the husband of the lovely and

accomplished Lady Venetia Verney, whose wit and beauty was so often the theme of admiration in the "Morning Post," "Court Journal," and other leading chronicles of the fashionable world. We had all read with deep interest, elaborate accounts of Lady Venetia's balls and assemblies; and had followed her movements with considerable pride and satisfaction as being the wife of our member. We really felt almost as if Lady Venetia represented the ladies of Dumbleton in the highest circles of London society; and we took quite a personal pleasure in her appearance at Court, her splendid diamonds, her rare old lace, her rich trains of *velours epinglé*, or *moiré antique*, reflected honour and credit on ourselves in a second-hand sort of manner; even though we had not the advantage of her Ladyship's acquaintance. But now, to think that this

very identical Lady Venetia was actually coming to reside on Dumbleton Common, where we might see her any day of the week ! or at all events, on one day of the week, (at church on Sundays.) She might, or she might not, patronize the Dumbleton tradespeople ; and of course it was not to be expected that she should visit all the Common families, or even invite them to her celebrated “ political réunions,” of which we had heard so much. Still, it would be an undeniable advantage to have the great people from London constantly driving through Dumbleton, or passing to and fro, on the railroad. To travel up to town in the same compartment with a cabinet minister, or even an under-secretary of state, would be sufficient in itself to cover any individual Dumbletonian with glory.

It is not therefore to be wondered at, that

we ladies of Dumbleton, found the discussion of the affairs of the Verney family, a far more interesting and engrossing topic of conversation than the sobriety of our washerwomen was likely to prove; and we all looked forward with considerable satisfaction to the ensuing summer, as a season of gaiety and diversion, the like of which had seldom fallen to our lot, in all our experience of Dumbleton life.

The Manor House was now a constant object of interest to us all. It was an ancient mansion, built in the time of the Tudors, gable-ended and picturesque; and was approached by a fine old avenue of lime trees. Few of us had ever been inside the lodge gates of the Manor House, as old Mrs. Honour saw no company, and, except Dr. Westcott, Mr. White (our worthy doctor), and her own domestics, I fancy Mrs. Honour

seldom admitted any body to her sacred presence. Now, however, the favorite walk with all our ladies, was the Manor House ; and grand reports were brought to me of the improvements that were making there ; the furniture, which was handsome, though old-fashioned, was sent up to town to be cleaned and renovated ; and a few additions in the same *roccoco* style, came down from Wardour Street to fill up all deficiencies. The garden was put in complete order, and was made brilliant with ribbon borders, and flower beds, filled with many thousand pots of geraniums, calceolarias, and lobelias, from the Dumbleton Nursery Gardens.

The china closets were ransacked, and the fine old specimens of blue delf, and oriental china, were disposed to the best advantage in marqueterie cabinets, or placed on carved ebony brackets on the walls.

Lady Venetia, we heard, was enchanted with her villa, and was determined to leave London for Dumbleton, as early as possible in the summer. She awaited the necessary preparations with the utmost impatience, (so we were informed,) and eagerly were the proceedings watched which should hasten the advent of residents of such undoubted distinction.

It so happened, that the Manor House was next door to Contango Abbey; the lodge gates actually touched, and the gardens and meadow lands ran side by side, down a sloping bank, both houses overlooked the same landscape, with the river, the railroads, and the identical London smoke in the distance.

Eliza and Sydney, therefore, took especial interest in the arrival of their next door neighbours; and it was with great pleasure

that they announced to me, that they had ascertained that the preparations were at length completed. The carpets were down, and the curtains were up, the holland covers were off, and the chintz covers were on, the carpenters and painters were out, and the glass, and linen, and plate, were in, and the Manor House was in readiness for its noble occupants. Lastly, one fine Saturday afternoon in May, a barouche was observed to turn into the lime avenue, containing two ladies and two gentlemen, who were pronounced, most unquestionably, to be the future inhabitants of the Dumbleton Manor House.

CHAPTER VI.

LADY VENETIA VERNEY AT HOME.

“She has beauty, but still you must keep your heart cool ;

She has wit, but you must not be caught so.

Thus Reason advises,—but Reason’s a fool,

And ’tis not the first time I have thought so.”

MOORE.

IN the course of the next fortnight we had most of us left our cards at the Manor House, and, what was still more extraordinary, Lady Venetia had returned them. We had not seen her, of course, but she evidently

meant to be very popular in Dumbleton; and, announcing that she intended to be “at home” every Saturday afternoon, she sent invitations to all the families with any pretensions to gentility in the neighbourhood.

This, of course, was quite an unexpected pleasure for Dumbleton. We had hoped for nothing half so pleasant; and we all admired and praised the charming Lady Venetia more than we had done before. In truth, she certainly was a beautiful woman—very tall, and stately-looking; her figure almost majestic, her head was small, well-formed, and gracefully placed upon her shoulders. But Lady Venetia could not move without grace; had she been a poor woman she might have made her fortune as an artist’s model. Her colouring, too, was good; her eyes were of a peculiarly dark

blue—almost violet-coloured, and under the shade of the long, dark lashes they often looked quite black ; her eyebrows were also dark and slightly arched, while her hair was of the richest brown—not pale golden like my pretty Sydney's, but—

“ In gloss and hue the chestnut, where the shell
Divides threefold, to show the fruit within.”

Then, too, her hand and arm were perfect—so round, so well-shaped, so white ; and her foot—of which we occasionally had a glimpse as her Ladyship got out of her carriage—was quite a sight to be seen. Altogether, there was something about our new neighbours quite unlike anything which we had ever known before in Dumbleton.

There certainly was never any one more fitted for popularity than Lady Venetia

Verney. It was not only that she was handsome: she was more than handsome—she was perfectly enchanting.

“With an air and a grace,
And a shape and a face,”
She charmed like beauty’s goddess.”

In fact, Lady Venetia possessed a singular fascination of manner, which made her quite irresistible when she chose to exert her powers of attraction. Somehow, or other, the moment she addressed you, you felt that you were her slave for the time being, and it was apparently her object to enslave the whole population of Dumbleton, for she spared no pains to render herself agreeable to us.

I don’t often ask Tom questions about his clients, but I could not help expressing one day, my wonder that it should be worth her Ladyship’s while to show us so much

civility. Tom made a little grimace, and observed that a dissolution was expected at the end of the session, and there were rumours that Lord Cleveden intended his eldest son, Lord Templecombe, to stand for Dumbleton in opposition to Sir Robert, and he supposed that might account for some of Lady Venetia's kind attentions; and though Tom, for his own part, believed Sir Robert was safe enough, still no harm could be done, by his living for a time in Dumbleton, and letting Lady Venetia leave cards and give parties. However, Tom advised me not to quote him, but to let our good neighbours take it for granted that Lady Venetia found them the most delightful and agreeable society in the world.

Lady Venetia had sent me a message by Tom, to say that she must insist on my coming to her garden parties, and, as she

heard I was a great invalid, she desired I would drive on to the lawn in my donkey-chair, and so see my friends without the trouble of walking about, or trusting to the chance of finding a vacant seat. This was really very kind and thoughtful; and, indeed, I could not otherwise have had the courage to show myself at the Manor House. So on the first Saturday of Lady Venetia's receptions, I drove Jenny in at a side entrance, with Tom walking by my side, and took up a position under a fine old cedar tree, where I could see all that went on quite at my ease.

Nothing could exceed Lady Venetia's kindness. She came up to me several times to ask if I had all I wanted, and seemed so pleased to see me that I felt quite in a flutter of pride and gratification, till I discovered 'that her Ladyship was equally

pleased to see every body else. As she stood near me for some little time, I was quite amused with watching her, and hearing how clever she was in saying precisely the right thing to everybody who came in.

To our Vicar and his wife she was especially cordial.

“Ah! my dear Mrs. Broke, here you are!” she began, as soon as they entered. “Only think how provoking it was that I should have been out when you were so good as to call here. How do you do, Mr. Broke? I have not seen you for years; and pray tell me all about dear Lady Cleveden. I hope she is pretty well, but I know she is always rather an invalid. And your father—is he in great force? Do you know my cousin, Spencer Hamilton? I am sure you must have been at Eton together—or was it your elder brother? Spencer, you know

Mr. Berresford Broke, don't you? Sir Robert has not come down from town yet; you must forgive him for not having returned your kind visit sooner; but poor creature! he is so shockingly busy, he never has a moment to himself, and I would not go through the foolish ceremony of leaving his card at *your* door."

"Mrs. Broke, I saw your sisters dancing away at A. House the other night—they looked very well and happy. I hoped Lady Emily would have brought them here to-day, but perhaps some other time we shall be more fortunate; and now, do tell me who everybody is. Who, for instance, is this important-looking man coming in now with a wife and daughter? I declare the girl is pretty—ain't she? quite pretty, if she were better dressed. Ought I to know them?"

“That is Mr. James Lambert, of Contango Abbey,” replied Mr. Broke, not seeing that I was within hearing. “He is one of our great men, brother to the lawyer, and his wife came from Australia; she was a widow when he married her, and the girl belongs to her. Miss Hope is an heiress as well as a beauty; she will have an immense fortune some day, I fancy, and she is really a very nice little thing. She is a great friend of my wife’s, I believe.”

“Oh! Sydney’s a darling, Lady Venetia; she really is,” added Mrs. Broke. “I quite dote on Sydney Hope. She is not a bit like her mother, who is, I must own, vulgar, though a very goodnatured kind of woman—but here they come.”

“How do you do, Mrs. Lambert?” began Lady Venetia, as if she had known Eliza all her life. “So glad to see you. I believe we

are next door neighbours, are we not? That's charming! It is so pleasant to have good neighbours. Mr. Lambert, I am so sorry Sir Robert is not here yet. He has been detained rather late at his office, I suppose. Let me introduce you to his private secretary, Mr. Hamilton, who is trying to fill his place to-day. And this is your daughter, Miss Hope? I must call my niece, she will like so much to know her. Spencer, just find Nora, will you? Oh! here she is. Nora, this is our neighbour, Miss Hope; she will be able to show you all the lions of Dumbleton. Miss Hope, you must let Sir Robert's niece, Miss Verney, ride with you sometimes.—I know you ride, for I have seen you go by on such a pretty horse. Nora delights in riding, but her uncle so seldom has an hour to spare for her, and I can't bear her to ride alone. Now, Nora,

settle a day to join Miss Hope in a long excursion; you must 'explore the country,' like Mrs. Elton in 'Emma,' you know. It will be quite charming for you to have a companion."

Miss Verney did not look so sure of this fact, but she assented with a tolerably good grace; and, as it was impossible to be cold, or stiff, with my sunny, light-hearted Sydney, I was glad to see the two girls chatting away in a friendly manner for the next quarter of an hour. Miss Honour Verney was certainly handsome, but she looked bored and unhappy I thought; she was dressed in deep mourning, and seldom raised her eyes from the ground.

Mr. Hamilton was a singularly good-looking young man, and evidently did his best to further Lady Venetia's endeavours to make the party go off well. He flitted

from one group to the other, and always seemed to have something pleasant to say to every body. His great, dark eyes were really magnificent, and though a thick black beard concealed the lower part of his face, his teeth were wonderfully white and even, and he seemed, so far as I could judge, to have a very frank, good-natured smile. He quite won my heart by admiring my poor old Jenny, and stroking her fine, long ears. He even took a beautiful rose out of his button-hole and gave it to her to eat; I could not help saying that I grudged Jenny the "Gloire de Dijon," and hinted that it would have been better bestowed on Jenny's mistress; upon which Mr. Hamilton laughed good-humouredly and went directly to fetch me another from a tree that was growing up the house. I felt quite honoured, not being much accustomed to

les petits soins from such fine gentlemen.

“ Well, I’m sure,” I thought, “ if I want a hero for my story, here is one all ready made to my hand. If I were a young lady I should certainly fall in love with Mr. Hamilton on the spot.”

I was quite delighted to see him go up and talk to Sydney, and I wondered how Miss Verney could look so downcast and sad, when such a pleasant-looking gentleman was evidently trying to make himself agreeable to her.

“ Mr. Mrs. and Miss Auriol,” announced the excessively gentlemanlike groom of the chambers ; who, among our young merchants and stockbrokers, really looked quite like a duke in disguise.

“ Ah ! Mrs. Auriol, you have found your way here, after all—I am so glad,” said Lady

Venetia, hastening to meet the infirm old lady, who hobbled towards her with the aid of her son's arm and a strong crutch stick ;
“and how have you been lately ?”

“Very indifferent indeed, I am sorry to say—very indifferent. I've made an effort to come out to-day, but I doubt if I sha'n't suffer for it to-morrow,” replied Mrs. Auriol, who was apt to be desponding about her health.

“Oh no ! I hope you won't do any thing of the kind,” said Lady Venetia. “You must go and sit in the drawing-room, if you find it the least damp, or chilly, in the garden. I know Sir Robert will be so pleased to see you when he comes in.”

“Ah ! my poor, dear, late husband was Sir Robert's tutor, you know ; Dr. Auriol was always so fond of Sir Robert, and

indeed, all the Verney family have invariably been our very good friends.

“ We have sustained a very sad loss in that saint upon earth, Mrs. Honour ; but she presented my boy with the beautiful church she built here, on the Common. I am sure your Ladyship will feel great interest in S. Monica’s.”

“ I shall, indeed,” said Lady Venetia, “ we certainly intend to go there to-morrow ; and now, mind, Mr. Auriol, you let us know if you have any pet old men, or women, in want of flannel, or soup, or coals, or anything of that sort ; don’t scruple to send them to us. And as for Nora, she will only be too delighted to teach your school-children, or go and read to your sick people. It is quite in her line. She is a name-sake of your old friend Mrs. Honour ; so I am sure, Miss Auriol, you will like to make acquaintance with her.”

“Nora, my dear, here is Mrs. Auriol, who was such a friend of your great aunt’s, you know. I must leave her in your charge for a little while ; do see that she finds an arm-chair somewhere, and has some tea, will you ?” and with a graceful little bow, Lady Venetia made her escape, and went off to greet Mrs. Pybus, who, to my surprise, came sailing in, looking a little ashamed of herself for being at a party at all, but evidently trying to carry it off with a high hand.

“So amiable of you to come and see me, Mrs. Pybus,” began Lady Venetia, with more than her usual *empressement*. “It is so pleasant to find oneself treated in this neighbourly fashion. What a charming place Dumbleton is ! such air ! such a view ! I tell Sir Robert he will never be able to drag me away to Midsummer Verney this autumn.”

“Indeed !” said Mrs. Pybus, rather stiffly. “Yes ! Dumbleton is in some respects, a highly favoured spot.”

“And I am sure you are quite the Lady Bountiful of the parish, Mrs. Pybus. Mr. Broke, no doubt, considers you as his right hand. They are such nice people, the Brokes.”

“The Vicar is, I believe, a very worthy man,” said Mrs. Pybus ; “but I cannot say he comes up to my idea of what a Christian minister ought to be—not by any means. The gospel, I regret to say, is seldom preached in Dumbleton Parish Church. I am aware I am speaking strongly,” she added, as Lady Venetia started quite involuntarily at this awful announcement ; “but it is the truth, and when your Ladyship knows me better, you will perceive that I am one of those persons who make a point

of always speaking the truth, upon all occasions."

"The truth, but not always, perhaps, the whole truth, dear Mrs. Pybus," suggested Lady Venetia, in a deprecating manner.

"I beg your Ladyship's pardon; the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," persisted Mrs. Pybus, emphatically. "I trust your Ladyship has not already decided upon taking a pew at the old church. There is a sweet young friend of mine, the Rev. Nicholas Kibble, who preaches the word with great power and eloquence at a humble, little chapel in the town. He has been greatly blessed in his ministry, and has snatched many brands from the burning. I should be happy to secure your Ladyship seats at Bartholomew's, if you like to take advantage of this opportunity of hearing the truth preached in all integrity."

“Thank you so much, Mrs. Pybus, you are very kind,” answered Lady Venetia in some perplexity, for Mrs. Pybus was rather a puzzle to her. “But to tell you the truth, Sir Robert does not like me to take the horses out on Sundays, and I am not much of a walker. No, I believe we have decided to go to that picturesque little church on the Common, close by. Sir Robert’s aunt built it, you know, and Mr. Auriol is the son of Sir Robert’s old tutor, Dr. Auriol, of Brazenose; Mrs. Auriol was also an old friend of the Verney family, and I am sure Sir Robert will wish to go to their church; thanks, very many.”

“Umph!” ejaculated Mrs. Pybus, indignantly. “I regret that I can’t advise anybody to go to Mr. Auriol’s church. I disapprove highly of his Jesuitical and Popish practices. But I grieve for the poor,

misguided, young man. I consider him in a very precarious condition. He may go any day."

"Dear me, how sad! poor Mr. Auriol! Is he really so ill as that? I observed he looked a little delicate, but surely he cannot be in a dying state."

"I did not refer to Mr. Auriol's health, Lady Venetia," said Mrs. Pybus, with solemnity. "I spoke rather of his spiritual condition. He is going to Rome as fast as he can; I consider him half way there already. Unless I am very much mistaken, I shall see Mr. Auriol at Rome, before many more years are over his head."

"Well, he could not go to a better place for the winter," observed Mr. Hamilton, who had sauntered up to his cousin in time to hear the last sentence of Mrs. Pybus's speech. "Always lots of English there. I

don't say it's a wholesome place in the summer, but for the winter months, it is really a capital place to go to. If Mr. Auriol would like letters to any of the artists at Rome, I shall be happy to furnish him with any number. Does he start soon?"

"Sir!" snorted Mrs. Pybus, drawing herself up to her full height, which was very little short of six feet. "You misunderstand my meaning completely. I had a more serious matter in view than the mere frivolous society of Italian artists. At some future time, when your Ladyship is *alone*, you may be inclined to pursue this subject further. At present, I perceive you are too much engaged with company to give me your full attention;" and Mrs. Pybus passed on with a dignified air, in search of more congenial companions.

The misguided young divine, meanwhile, utterly unconscious of these animadversions, spent his time in lingering near my niece Sydney, who had long been the secret object of his affections; though at the same time poor Mr. Auriol was unwilling to commit himself by openly expressing his admiration.

So, he—

“Unable to conceal his pain,
Gazed on the fair,
Who caused his care,
And sighed and looked, sighed and looked,
Sighed and looked, and sighed again.”

He would not venture to address Sydney, lest he should be guilty of yielding to a sore temptation, or, may be, for fear she should not receive his advances kindly, or, perhaps, from a mixture of the two motives. At the same time, Mr. Auriol had not the courage to go

far out of sight of my pretty niece, so he stood leaning against a tree, behind her, in an attitude of the deepest despondency, tearing his beard frantically, whenever she spoke to any one else ; and glowering in a most forbidding manner at every other gentleman who approached her, especially at Mr. Spencer Hamilton ; who, however, far from being alarmed by these threatening looks, came up to the Curate with the utmost politeness, and told him how glad he was to hear he intended to visit Rome ; hoped he would take care to visit the studios there, and offered him an unlimited number of letters of introduction.

CHAPTER VII.

COÛLEUR DE ROSE.

“Suspicion entering with a serpent’s fang ;
Poisons the healthy mind. A jaundiced eye
Henceforth will look upon each trifling act
And turn it into evil.”

SHAKESPEARE.

“WHAT an awful woman that is, Venetia !”
said Mr. Hamilton, with a shudder. “She
is a perfect Gorgon — Medusa herself, I
should not wonder. What could make you
ask her to come here ?”

“Hush ! Spencer. Don’t you know her ?

She is not Medusa, but Proserpine. Somebody told me she was the most influential person in all Dumbleton, and ruled the whole parish. Her husband, the late lamented Pluto—or Pybus—or whatever she called him, was the head of the great Iron Works here, and she inherits half the shares (I have very little doubt), of the whole company. I know Sir Robert is most anxious to conciliate Her Majesty of the Infernal Regions, so pray be careful and don't outrage her best feelings. You and Nora will certainly have to go and be converted by her pet preacher. As for me, I shall escape under stress of delicate health. Here is Mr. Broke, let us make him tell us all about it. Mr. Broke, I must get you to explain to Mr. Hamilton how very important it is to win the affections of Mrs. Pybus. You know we are bent on being greatly

beloved in Dumbleton. Sir Robert has taken a fidget about his next election. They say your brother, Lord Templecombe, means to oppose him, and, of course, we must do our little best to counteract his advances. Now, do be generous and tell me who I ought to make up to, of all these people. The Lamberts, of course, are our own private property; there is no doubt about them—”

“ I really don’t think, Lady Venetia, you need be much alarmed about Tempy. I believe my father wishes him to get into Parliament, but Tempy has no ‘call,’ as Mrs. Pybus would say, for that sort of thing. He is much too idle and too fond of his own comforts to exert himself much in the matter; and I don’t believe poor Tempy would have a chance, against *you*, Lady Venetia,” added Mr. Broke, with a polite bow.

“ You are very kind, Mr. Broke, to say so ; but I don’t trust you on this point—you may have some sinister design in putting me off my guard ; I shall not relax my efforts to be popular, I assure you, in spite of all your pretty speeches.”

“ But you may take my word for it, Lady Venetia, that you are throwing away your ammunition upon our excellent friend, Mrs. Pybus ; she is not worth the powder and shot—depend upon it. She is a troublesome woman, fond of meddling and interfering in parish matters—a regular ‘*maîtresse femme*.’ But she has little or no influence at the Proserpine Works, if that is your object. No ! The man for you is my friend, John Beaumont—Beaumont is a capital fellow ! He is the managing director at the Iron Works, and the men there, all worship him. I consider Beaumont quite

the ruling power of Dumbleton. He is my churchwarden, and a more hard-headed, sensible man, I never wish to deal with. Now, I am perfectly disinterested in telling you this, Lady Venetia, for you know if Tempy has any particular opinions, he is a Conservative, and John Beaumont is a thorough-going Radical. He might come in for Dumbleton himself if he chose it, but he has no nonsense of that kind about him, and will support Sir Robert through thick and thin, I'll answer for him. Oh! Tempy has no chance at all here, and so I shall tell my father."

"Dear! dear!" cried Lady Venetia, wringing her hands in playful despair. "But why did nobody tell me all this before? What am I to do? I don't even know Mr. Beaumont by sight. I dare say we never asked him to come here to-day.

Shall I call on Mrs. Beaumont and apologise? Is there a Mrs. Beaumont?"

"No; but there is a Miss Beaumont, his sister, a very good kind of sensible woman. The father owned the original Iron Works here, which have now turned into 'The Proserpine Company,' and the ground they stand on, belongs to John Beaumont still; he wisely refused to sell it; he is, also, a large shareholder, and, as I told you before, the managing director. The fact is, James Lambert, the present chairman, was, at one time, to have married Miss Beaumont, but they quarrelled, or he jilted her, I don't quite know which, and he ended by marrying this rich Australian widow instead. She is rather vulgar, and a little foolish. (She is a great patroness of my wife's, by the way.) But Miss Beaumont is worth a dozen of her, and so thinks James Lambert, I sus-

pect, now it is too late. Anyhow, he is devoted to young Beaumont and has got him on wonderfully in the world. Beaumont will be the richest man in Dumbleton one of these days."

"How interesting! What a charming, romantic story! And now, what had I better do, dear Mr. Broke? Can I ask this all powerful Mr. Beaumont and his sister to dinner? and will you come and meet them?"

"Delighted. I am sure you would like John; he is a very clever, well-informed man, and has made some most curious inventions and improvements, which have proved of immense value to the Company. Sir Robert would find him well worth talking to. You need not ask the sister unless you wish it. Margaret Beaumont is not a woman to be affronted at that kind of thing."

“Thank you so very much, Mr. Broke. You have put me upon quite a new tack altogether. My object will now be to gain the heart of Mr. John Beaumont; I declare I feel quite like a second Eurydice already.”

“Don’t forget that I am to have the *rôle* of Orpheus, then, that’s all,” said Mr. Hamilton, in a low voice, as the Vicar moved away.

Lady Venetia looked suddenly round, and seeing me within hearing, came up to ask me very kindly if I had all I wanted, and sent Mr. Hamilton to get me a cup of tea; and then disappeared to another part of the garden.

I soon began to feel a little weary of watching and listening, and got my brother James to accompany me to the Abbey, Tom and I, having arranged to dine there. Eliza

and Sydney remained behind to amuse themselves a little longer. They did not come in till we had nearly finished dinner, for James would not wait for them.

Sydney looked brilliantly happy, and was quite in an ecstasy of delight with her party.

“Oh! Aunt Patty! was not it charming?” she began, as she seated herself between James and myself. “No, thank you, daddy; I don’t want any dinner. It has been too nice! I never thought anything could be so nice; and only to think it will happen all over again next Saturday, and the Saturday after, and every Saturday for two or three months to come!”

“Well! well, child, but that is no reason why you should starve yourself,” said Tom.

“Oh! I’m much too happy to be hun-

gry," said Sydney, looking radiant with joy. "Well, Uncle Tom, if I *must* eat something, I will have some cream cheese, please, and some bread—there that will do. How tiresome dinner is! I wish people never had dinner except on dull days, when there is nothing else to do."

"Thank you, Missy," said James, laughing. "I am sorry I can't quite agree with you there. I am ashamed to own I am not at all too happy to eat a very good dinner myself."

"Well, I must say, I think it has been a very pleasant afternoon," said Eliza. "There was not such a mixture of people as I should have expected. Lady Venetia has done it very handsomely. She shows some discrimination to have managed it so well, for the first time. I was a little surprised not to see those Beaumonts there. They are ge-

nerally so pushing, and force themselves everywhere. But, of course, they are not of a calibre to be asked to the Manor House."

"I should have called John Beaumont one of the first men in Dumbleton," said Tom.

"John Beaumont may be a great man in his own forges and among his own blacksmiths and people, but I don't see that he has a claim to be considered anybody in good society, or his sister either—a little, plain-looking woman, I call her. I see nothing in her: but I am surprised she did not contrive to get herself asked to the Manor House, too."

When once Eliza got upon the Beaumont subject she was generally rather difficult to manage. She had unfortunately got some inkling of James's former attachment to Margaret, and my sister-in-law was not of the most generous disposition in the world.

“I have no doubt Margaret could have been asked to this party as easily as the rest of us, if she had tried,” said Tom. “I imagine Lady Venetia just gave the cards that were left at the door, to her groom of the chambers, and desired him to make out the list of invitations from them. If Margaret Beaumont had left cards, she would have been asked too; but, I believe Lady Venetia means to invite the Beaumonts to dinner. It seems, Sir Robert is anxious to make John’s acquaintance. She spoke to me about it, and asked me for their address.”

“Sir Robert anxious to make the acquaintance of John Beaumont!” repeated Eliza, scornfully. “What on earth could Sir Robert find in John Beaumont, worth the trouble of seeking? I never heard such nonsense in my life.”

“Let me tell you, Eliza, that there is a great deal in John Beaumont, which might make any man proud to have the honour of his acquaintance,” said James, sternly.

“Oh, yes! I know *you* think there is nobody to be compared to the Beaumonts—I am quite aware of that. It is no news to me, to hear that you consider Margaret the first of women. I ought to feel very much flattered, I am sure, that you married poor, foolish, ignorant me, when you might have had such a paragon of perfection, as Miss Beaumont, for your wife.”

“Well, well! Eliza, let us talk about something else,” said James, with a sigh. “I know by experience that the Beaumonts never form a very satisfactory subject of conversation, and it is one which I invariably avoid, when with you, my dear.”

“But one that you prefer to any other,

when you are *not* with me. Eh ! my dear ? —Oh yes ! I understand all about it—I am not quite blind, believe me, my love,” said Eliza, in her most provoking manner.

“Neither am I blind, Mrs. Lambert,” said James, getting up in a fit of exasperation, and hastily disappearing through the open window, followed by Tom.

“It is the most absurd thing in the world, to me, why you will all make such a fuss about these stupid Beaumonts,” said Eliza, when they had gone.

“I believe you began the subject yourself, Eliza,” said I coldly.

“I know James only does it to plague me,” she continued, without noticing my remark. “He can’t really see anything in Margaret ; but he pretends to admire her on purpose to tease me. It is so foolish of him.”

“ I remember Margaret a very pretty girl,” said I, “ and she is universally admitted to be a very superior woman now—but,” I added, rather bitterly I am afraid, for it was a sore subject with me, “ I think James gave us a pretty strong proof that *he* did not see much in Margaret worth caring about, when he left her, to go off to Australia, and married somebody else. If he had really loved Margaret he would either have remained in England, or have proved constant to her during his absence.”

“ Ah! I know you have never forgiven my poor husband for preferring me to your favourite Margaret,—now have you? Yet you must own, it has been rather an advantage to him in some respects. He has improved his position just a very little, I suspect. Eh?”

“ Money is not the most important con-

sideration in life, nor position either," said I, hastily.

"Don't you think so? Then, pray what is?" asked Eliza, sharply. "I don't know, Martha, what you would have, if money and position don't satisfy you."

I was within an ace of blurting out, that "Happiness was to my mind a more important consideration than either," but fortunately I had the presence of mind to stop just in time, and turning to Sydney, asked her how she had got on with Miss Verney.

"Oh! she is so nice," said Sydney, pleased to get an opportunity of speaking; "so very nice—only a little reserved, I think, at first; but I liked her very much indeed. And is not Lady Venetia the most delightful person you ever saw in your life, Aunt Patty?—and then Sir Robert!" Sir Robert came in, after you left, and he is the dearest old darling!—

so stately and so polite and so dignified, and yet, saying the prettiest things in the world. Oh! he was quite delightful, too; and Mr. Hamilton—" Here words sufficiently strong to express her approbation, seemed to fail Sydney altogether, and she stopped short.

"Do you know, Aunt Patty, if all the misfortunes that ever happened to anybody, were to come to me during the rest of my life, I think I should still be a happy woman after passing such a day as this has been, and then, only to think that it may last all the summer, perhaps!"

"You are young, Sydney. You don't know what you may have to undergo yet."

"But if I have only a few more such pleasant days as this, I shall be quite contented with my lot in life, Aunt Patty. I have been so very, very happy—you don't know—you

can't understand. Look at that sky—how bright it is!—all in a glow of crimson light, and it is reflected in the river, and on the tops of the trees, and upon those houses in the distance, — even the smoke is rose-coloured. Now I feel this evening as if the happiness of to-day would throw a reflection over all the rest of my life. I shall see everything *en couleur de rose* for the future.”

“I trust you may, most sincerely, my child—I hope and pray you may,” said I;—but Sydney’s raptures frightened me—they were too bright to last.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CONVERSATION AT THE MANOR HOUSE.

“But why do you go?” said the lady, while both sate under the yew—

And her eyes were alive in their depth, as the kraken beneath the sea-blue.

“Because I fear you,” he answered, “because you are far too fair,

And able to strangle my soul, in a mesh of your gold-coloured hair.”

MRS. BARRETT BROWNING.

I THINK, I had better record in this place, a conversation which affected in no slight degree the fate of my heroine. Of course, I

knew nothing about it, till long afterwards, but I have every reason to believe it took place very much as follows. After the party at the Manor House was over and the guests had departed, the Verney family dined, and after dinner, Sir Robert retired to his library to examine the contents of several important-looking, red boxes, which had accompanied him from London—Miss Verney went up to write letters in her own room—Lady Venetia and Mr. Hamilton were drinking their coffee under the old cedar tree on the lawn, when she observed suddenly to her cousin, “I really think, Spencer, we have made a very good beginning. We seem to be on the high road to popularity, and now, all we have to do, is to keep in it. I don’t imagine it will be a very arduous undertaking. These good people of Dumbleton seem to me, to be good-

natured and simple-minded to a degree—and even Mr. Broke owns, Lord Templecombe is not likely to prove a very formidable adversary. Spencer, I have an idea! How would it do to get Lord Templecombe here, (I could manage it through my sister) and make him marry Nora? That girl is quite a *gêne* to me. She watches everything I do, or say, and looks daggers at me if I don't precisely please her. She is quite a skeleton at the feast—I can't tell you how nervous it makes me to feel her eyes always upon me. I would give the world to marry her off, out of the way—but she speaks to nobody, and looks broken-hearted. It is rather too much to expect from me, that I should have all Sir Robert's nieces, as well as himself, to look after."

"I don't suppose Templecombe would take to Miss Verney," said Mr. Hamilton

thoughtfully. "She would not suit him, by any means. He is much more likely to marry Die Hartland, of the two."

"But Die would never be such a fool as to marry Templecombe, surely. She has her liberty now, which is all she cares about, and a house in town and a place in the country, and more money than she knows what to do with—Why should Die marry again?"

"Why do widows ever marry, if it comes to that, when they have enough to live upon without it? But they constantly do marry, and so will Die, you'll see, unless that dragon Mrs. Bowyer Dawkins puts her spoke in the wheel—"

"Horrid, odious woman! I can't endure her!" exclaimed Lady Venetia. "She is the most illnatured, mischievous creature in London. She hates me."

"Is it possible! I would not have believed

that even Mrs. Bowyer Dawkins could have sunk to such a depth of degradation as that," said Mr. Hamilton, laughing.

"It's no joke, Spencer. Let me tell you that to be hated by Mrs. Bowyer Dawkins, is enough to ruin any woman's reputation; you know how she talks."

"But not of you, Venetia!"

"Yes, of me—and of you, and Die repeats it all directly, as in duty bound—now what do you say?"

"Hang, Mrs. Bowyer Dawkins!" said Spencer, still trying to laugh, but looking annoyed in spite of himself. "I wonder you allow your sister to repeat such nonsense to you, Venetia. She ought to know better."

"Spencer, I wish you would marry," said Lady Venetia, after a pause. "You have been going about the world long enough. I wonder you are not tired of it."

“I am; very—” replied Spencer; “but what am I to do?—I can’t live upon air, like a chameleon—unfortunately for me.

“But you might find a woman with some money. You don’t like Die, unfortunately?”

“Not in that sort of way, I must confess—nor has my good cousin Lady Diana Hartland, any peculiar affection for me—if it comes to that.”

“Well! it must be owned that you and Die would never get on together—but there are other women in the world—now listen Spencer—a brilliant notion strikes me! Did you observe that young lady who was here to-day—a Miss Hope. She was talking to Nora for a long time. I think I saw you speaking to her—a pretty, little, fair, innocent looking thing, with yellow hair, and blue eyes.”

“Oh! I remember. But I fancied she had been a Miss Lambert. Surely she came in with Tom Lambert’s brother—yes, a pretty little girl enough.”

“She is James Lambert’s step-daughter,” said Lady Venetia. “Somebody told me all about her. Stop! it was that silly Mrs. Broke (a Marsham she was, you know, and the greatest goose in the world), but it seems she has an enthusiasm of the most mis-sish nature, for this little Hope girl. Well! Selina Broke tells me, her friend Miss Hope is to have an immense fortune, either when she marries, or comes of age. Six, or seven thousand a year—that sort of thing to begin with—and the reversion of her mother’s jointure eventually, and old Lambert the stepfather, who dotes on her, is likely to leave her as much more, in course of time—now there’s a chance for you, Spencer; don’t

let her be snapped up by one of these great brewers, or iron masters. You might win her heart in half an hour, if you tried."

"*Le jeu ne vaut pas la chandelle*," said Spencer carelessly.

"Think," continued Lady Venetia, "how comfortable you might be, in one of those nice, new houses in South Kensington for instance — with say, ten thousand a-year, and a shooting box in Scotland, and plenty of hunters at Melton, and a good simple child of a wife, who would adore you and admire you from morning to night. Seriously, Spencer, it would be by far the best thing you could do!"

"Do you really think so, Via? But this means that you are tired of me, I presume. You wish to get rid of me?" said Mr. Hamilton reproachfully.

“Get rid of you? Nonsense! Why be rid of you because you are married? Of course, it would make no difference to our seeing you every day, as usual. Why should it? No! You must let me find you a house, and give me *carte blanche* to furnish and arrange it for you. I mistrust the little Hope’s taste in such matters; and then you will both come to Midsummer Verney in the autumn, just as you always do. You could still be with us, as much as you please, only you would have a pretty little wife to go home to, when you were tired of us, instead of being obliged to sit at your club playing at whist, or talking scandal—that is all. It would be much better for you in every way.”

“Thank you. You are very obliging, Via. And so if I married, you really would have no sort of feeling about it?” asked

Spencer, in a voice expressive of considerable *pique*.

“Of course not. Why should I?” she answered, with a light mocking laugh.

“Because you know very well, Venetia, that I have never cared for any human being but you, ever since I was born, and never shall as long as I live. You can’t pretend to be ignorant of that fact; but you never lose an opportunity of tormenting me, as I know by experience.”

“Now, Spencer, you know I never allow you to talk in that foolish, sentimental way. I dislike it particularly. Do listen to reason. Taking it for granted, that about ten years ago, when we were young and foolish, we fell in love with each other. Pray is that any reason why we should both persist in remaining in single blessedness for the rest of our natural lives? If my revered parents

had permitted us to marry on twopence a year, before we had arrived at years of discretion, as we wished to do, how dreadfully tired of each other we should have been by this time ! You would be now earning an uncommonly meagre, weekly stipend, I dare say, as a billiard marker in the purlieus of St. James's, while I sat at home in our garret in St. Giles's, and tried to eke out a scanty existence by taking in plain needlework. We should probably have finished by spending our last halfpenny in buying a little charcoal to put an end to our miserable existences—like the people in the 'Streets of London.' Now tell me honestly—don't you think I took the sensible line, when I proved my filial obedience by marrying Sir Robert Verney, directly papa told me to do so, without making any unnecessary fuss about the matter?"

“But you must remember that *you* have no heart whatever, Venetia—you never had. The odd thing is, why I am such a fool as to care about you,” said Spencer Hamilton bitterly.

“Come ! come ! what would you have ? Would you rather I had pined away and died of consumption at the end of six months all for pure love of you ?”

“There was not much danger of that. You have not got it in you, to care about anybody but yourself. I know that well enough,” replied Spencer, still looking gloomy.

“You are my best and dearest friend. Can’t you be content with that ?”

“I wish I could, Venetia, with all my heart and soul.”

“But why not ? You are so provoking, Spencer. We might be all so happy and

comfortable, if you would only be a little sensible. What is the use of tormenting me and yourself, by constantly harping back to old days, and trying to revive old feelings? *That* is selfishness, if you please. What good can it do either of us? You know how kind Sir Robert is to me, and to you too, for the matter of that. I know you would not wrong him, in the slightest degree, any more than I would myself. I am sure we are both sincerely attached to him, and I don't like you to talk to me in this way. I don't indeed. That is one reason why I should be glad if you were married. When once you had a dear, pretty little wife of your own, you would soon forget me. There would be an end of all this nonsense then."

"Never, Via, never—that is quite hopeless. It will be only making one more life miserable. What has this poor girl done

to you, that you condemn her also, to fall a victim to your heartlessness?"

"Oh! she would be happy enough, believe me. To do you justice, Spencer, you could not treat her unkindly. You are too tender-hearted and good-tempered for that. She will do very well, depend upon it; and you will end by falling desperately in love with your own wife, some of these days. I know you better than you know yourself."

"Via, in all your life had you ever one spark of feeling, I wonder? It is hopeless trying to make you understand," cried Spencer, starting up angrily.

"Have patience for one moment, Spencer. I am not unfeeling—I am not heartless—neither am I totally devoid of principle. I have still some regard left for what is right, in spite of you, I could almost say. Whether

I did right, or wrong, in marrying Sir Robert, in the first instance, is another question. It is no matter about that, now. What is done, can't be undone ; but since I have married him, I am determined to do my duty to him, and to be true to him in thought, word, and deed. I want to be thoroughly open, honest, and loyal. Spencer, don't try to make me as false and treacherous as these women say I am. You know, (nobody better,) how much harm it does me to have you always here. Your manner to me is not what it should be. You know what the world is, and how ready people are to take advantage of every careless word, or look. It is hard upon me, Spencer. I don't want to appeal to Sir Robert ; but it must end in that, if you are so cruel and thoughtless. If you had ever really cared for me, you would have some regard for my good

name. You surely would not do your utmost to ruin my reputation, as you are doing now. I have tried so hard to be good, and to do what is right, and to make everybody happy. Why will you not leave me in peace?" said Lady Venetia, bursting into tears.

"Oh, Via! my darling! what can I do? I will leave England to-morrow if it will make you happier. I will go out as consul to some island in the antipodes, if you wish it. You know you have only to say one word, and I will instantly obey you, as I always have done, all my life. Shall I start this evening?"

"No! Spencer, don't go away; I don't want to lose you. Stay in England, and let us be happy and comfortable together. If you go, there will be a dozen stories made up on the spot; but if you will only marry

and settle down quietly here, all gossip will be knocked on the head at once, and we shall be as good friends as ever, shall we not?"

"Well! have it your own way, Venetia, as usual," replied Spencer, after a moment's silence. "I'll even marry this unfortunate girl, to please you. What's her name? Poor thing! I am sorry for her! If any harm comes of it, may she forgive you, for the sin will be on your head, not mine."

"I am not afraid for *her*, Spencer. She will be a very happy woman—I know she will. And now, neither Die, nor Mrs. Bowyer Dawkins can say a word more about us. You'll see, Spencer, how soon you'll begin to like her when once she is your wife; and now let us go in; I dare say Nora is sitting in judgment upon us in the drawing-room

all this time. She is so thoroughly censorious, and she dislikes you, and distrusts me—I see it in her eye. Now I shall begin to feel comfortable and at ease again. Thank you, Spencer. You will never repent it.”

“It is to be hoped not,” answered her cousin gloomily. “But I am afraid I shall only repent it once, and that will be for ever.”

Poor Lady Venetia! She was not quite so heartless as she appeared to be: but she was a woman of the world, and women who live in the world have to leave their hearts behind them, sometimes. She had, at her father’s request, thrown over the man she loved because he was poor, and married a man she did not love, because he was rich; and, as she said of herself, she had struggled hard to be true and faithful to her husband, even in thought; and Sir Robert

was so kind, so indulgent, and so confiding, that she would not wilfully have deceived him for the universe. But things had gone against her, poor lady. Her cousin was so desperately in love with her, and was so impetuous, and reckless; and she had tried in vain to teach him to think of her merely as a sister; and then Sir Robert was fond of him, and had made him his private secretary; so that Spencer Hamilton was constantly in the house, and Sir Robert was so much at his office; and when he was not at his office, he was always busy. He left her to do just what she liked, from morning to night, and never asked any questions; and so by insensible degrees, Spencer's manner had grown a little warmer than was absolutely necessary in addressing a married cousin, till, at last, Lady Venetia felt it was time to draw up sharply with a strong and

decided hand. Perhaps she would not have found this out for herself, or at least, not have seen it so plainly, had it not been for the arrival of a young girl, an orphan niece of Sir Robert's, to whom he was sole guardian, and who had no other home to go to but his house. Honour Verney had spent most of her life in the country, and her habits and ideas were as far removed from Lady Venetia's, as light is from darkness.

A look of grave surprise, not unmingled with indignation, from the quiet, demure Nora, first opened Lady Venetia's eyes to the possibility that she was going too far, and this opinion was confirmed by a few inuendos from that ill-natured and mischievous woman, Mrs. Bowyer Dawkins, who, having no character of her own to lose, made very light work of despatching the characters of other people.

Venetia really believed that she was consulting Spencer's interests, as well as her own, in persuading him to marry Sydney Hope, the heiress of Dumbleton; and she felt no doubts, or misgivings, on Sydney's account. She honestly thought it was impossible for the girl to meet with a destiny more propitious than to be the wife of the handsome and agreeable Spencer Hamilton.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PROSERPINE IRON WORKS.

“I know not if I know what true love is,
But if I know, then, if I love not him,
Methinks there is none other I can love.”

TENNYSON.

HAVING been thus admitted behind the scenes, you will not be so much surprised as we Dumbleton people were (who had not that advantage), when, about a month after the Verneys' arrival at the Manor House, we heard rumours that Mr. Spencer Hamil-

ton had proposed to Sydney Hope. There had been three other Saturday parties since the first one, which I described to you ; and the James Lamberts had been asked to dinner, to meet the Brokes and the Beaumonts, much to Eliza's vexation, as it afterwards appeared. I had not gone to any of these gaieties, and had heard of them only at second hand. Sydney was never tired of talking about the beauty and grace of Lady Venetia, and the very great kindness shown her by Sir Robert. She was also eloquent on the subject of Miss Nora Verney, with whom she appeared to be very intimate.

Of Mr. Hamilton, I heard less than of any other member of the family, but when she did mention him, it was with downcast eyes and crimson cheeks that spoke volumes.

Still, I must confess, it was quite a sur-

prise to me, when James came in, one evening, to announce to Tom and myself, that Mr. Hamilton had actually written to ask his consent to marry his step-daughter, and had made very handsome offers, as far as the settlement of her fortune was concerned ; he certainly did not seem to be actuated by mercenary views.

Sydney, he found, had made up her own mind upon the subject most completely, and he saw no reason for opposing the marriage. Mr. Hamilton was very highly connected, and James knew nothing against his character. His want of fortune was a matter of no importance. Sydney would have enough for them both, and as she was evidently bent upon it, James had given his consent very cordially.

The next morning, Eliza came to talk it over, and she too was pleased, upon the

whole. She would have preferred a man of rank, she owned ; and as there was a chance of Lord Templecombe coming to Dumbleton, she thought Sydney might have waited a few months, before finally making up her mind. But, as Sydney refused to listen to reason, and was quite wild to marry Mr. Hamilton, that could not be helped ! “ After all, what was the use of having money, if one could not please one’s self,” argued Eliza, who had certainly acted up to her views in this respect ; and she added, that Mr. Hamilton was most distinguished looking, and quite a man of fashion. It was not often, in Dumbleton, that a young man like Mr. Hamilton was to be met with ; and as James positively refused to go to London for the season, Eliza owned, it was perhaps only natural that Sydney should have taken a fancy to the first real gentleman who happened to

cross her path. Lady Venetia would introduce her cousin's wife into the very highest circles, Eliza felt sure ; and with her beauty and fortune, she had no fear, but that Sydney would make her own way in the world and be a fashionable London lady very speedily.

As this was apparently the height of Eliza's ambition for her daughter, we were able to congratulate her upon Sydney's prospects with a good grace ; and James's lament, that John Beaumont had not been the man to marry his step-daughter, met with no sympathy whatever. As for Sydney herself, when she came to be caressed, and admired, and wished joy, no words can describe her state of brilliant happiness.

“ Spencer was so good ! and so clever !! and so agreeable ! and so vastly superior to every other human being who ever lived,”

that nothing we could say in his favour, was half enough to satisfy Sydney's requirements.

“But, Uncle Tom, did you *ever* meet with such a man before?” she enquired very confidently. “Now, Aunt Patty, you must own, that you *never* saw anybody who is to be compared with Spencer, for one single moment? Is not he just like a prince in a fairy tale; and am I not the most fortunate woman that ever was born? What have I done to deserve such intense happiness? What can he see in me, I wonder, that he should come here and choose me for his wife, when he might have married any body in the world? I feel so unworthy of him, Aunt Patty, I don't know how I shall ever be able to repay Spencer for all his goodness to me. Oh! if he should ever find he has made a mistake! or change his

mind! or grow tired of me! what would become of me then? I believe it would kill me at once. I am sure, I could not bear to live for four-and-twenty hours, if Spencer grew cold to me, or even looked bored with me, as husbands sometimes are, with their wives. It would be so very, very terrible."

I tried to remonstrate a little with Sydney on this point, and assured her that she had better be prepared for an occasional change in Mr. Hamilton's humour. I hinted that the best of men will sometimes speak sharply, or look irritated by some trifling occurrence. I reminded her that even Tom, usually the best tempered of his sex, had been known to be a little sulky at times—before dinner, for instance; but I might as well have talked to the winds. Sydney was fixed in her determination to die of a broken

heart the moment she detected the slightest alteration in Spencer's manner, and nothing I could adduce, served in any degree to shake this resolution.

Soon after this auspicious marriage had been arranged, Sir Robert Verney one day expressed a desire to go over the Proserpine Iron Works, of which my brother was, as I have said, chairman of the board of directors.

James therefore determined in this capacity to show Lady Venetia and her friends some civility, by giving her a grand collation in the large reading-room, or lecture hall, which had been built for the use of the workmen employed in the establishment; and several of the leading directors and shareholders of the company, with their families, were also invited to join the party.

I agreed to come to this luncheon among

the rest, though of course, it was out of the question for me to hobble about the immense workshops and foundries, with the rest of the visitors ; but I had the pleasure of seeing them all arrive and set off in procession on their tour of inspection, and I heard so many particulars of their progress afterwards, that I knew what happened, almost as well as if I had been there, myself.

James led the way, with Lady Venetia on his arm. She was evidently equipped with a view to conquest, in a grey silk gown, looped up over a red satin petticoat, short enough to show off to the best advantage her dainty little feet and ankles, which were clad for the occasion, in the smartest and highest-heeled Balmoral boots that had ever appeared in Dumbleton ; a rough white pea-jacket with immense buttons all over it, and

a very coquettish little hat, completed her attire ; and as she entered the dark cavernous-looking foundry, bowing and smiling right and left, to the half-clad, grimy-looking workmen, I could not help laughing, as I remembered her Ladyship's intention to appear in the character of Eurydice—for though the goddess was probably not dressed in precisely the same costume, the contrast, I thought, between herself and the Cyclops could not have been more marked than that of Lady Venetia Verney to our honest Dumbleton workmen.

Sir Robert followed with his niece and John Beaumont, who, as manager of the works, was more capable of doing the honours of them than James was. Eliza declined going. It was not a sight much in her line, and she found more agreeable employment in superintending the arrange-

ment of the luncheon which was to ensue.

Mr. Hamilton, of course, offered his arm to Sydney, who, however, was too much engrossed with her companion to take any very lively interest in watching the transformation of bars of pig iron, into the most delicate and intricate machinery.

Mr. and Mrs. Broke, besides several of the directors, with Mrs. Pybus and Margaret Beaumont, accompanied the party. Mrs. Pybus, I heard afterwards, passed most of her time in disseminating teetotal and other tracts among the men, and also in inveighing loudly against the evils of drunkenness and the errors of the church of Rome, between which two subjects, there appeared to exist some confusion in her own mind. To her eagerness to gain converts, however, Mrs. Pybus fell a victim—for lingering behind

the rest of her party, the unfortunate lady nearly stepped into a stream of molten iron, that was meandering pleasantly through the foundry, on its way from one of the furnaces; and if some of her audience had not somewhat roughly seized Mrs. Pybus by the arm, and dragged her back just in time, the consequences would probably have been serious. Her eloquence was so much checked by this incident, that her voice was scarcely heard again during the whole day.

The rest of the party proceeded in safety through their peregrinations—though neither Lady Venetia nor Sydney saw much to admire, in the cataracts of red-hot metal as they poured from the furnaces into the vessels and moulds placed for their reception. They soon came out, escorted by Mr. Hamilton, and professed to be in a state of enthusiastic delight with the beautiful pictu-

resque lights and shadows, and then they all three sat down by the river-side, to cool themselves, rest, and eat ices till Sir Robert and the other visitors made their appearance.

Sydney seemed to be quite a favorite of Lady Venetia's already, and though naturally, under the circumstances, she felt a little shy and subdued, I thought her blushes and demure looks most becoming to her.

As I sat watching them from the window I was rather provoked to see that Lady Venetia took up the whole of Mr. Hamilton's attentions.—Indeed he almost turned his back to Sydney, as he conversed in an animated and eager manner with his cousin; but my little step-niece looked perfectly happy and contented.

To be near Spencer was quite enough for her. To hear him talk, was all she cared

for—no matter whom he talked to, or what he talked about ; it was Spencer's voice that sounded in her ears, and Spencer was her own private property, and she could talk to him as much as she liked, in future years ; and so Sydney indulged in a delicious day-dream of happiness and watched the great river flowing at her feet, while she sat beside Spencer, and idly listened to his conversation with Lady Venetia. She felt too happy and too dreamy to wish to talk herself, and besides, she did not always know exactly what to say. Lady Venetia had so many friends and relations to talk to Spencer about. Sydney would know them all too, one of these days ; but just yet, she did not care much for them, somehow, or other. And then, as she used to tell me, Spencer liked to talk over politics with Lady Venetia, and what on earth could she say

about politics. She had not a notion what the precise difference was, between Liberals and Conservatives ; and as for Radicals, she could not make them out at all, only she thought they were generally rather dangerous people who wanted to make a revolution, or something of that sort. But whenever she tried to talk politics to Spencer, he only laughed at her and called her “a little fool,” so she thought she had better leave all that to Lady Venetia for the present. There would be time enough for her to find out all about it by-and-bye, when she was older and wiser, and not quite too delightfully happy, to think about such things. At present, she could think of nothing but Spencer. Meantime, it seemed that Sir Robert and Miss Verney had not been contented with a hasty survey of the whole scene, but had entered minutely into every

detail of the process, and Miss Verney had been especially delighted with the great steam shears, which snipped off thick bars of iron as easily as I could cut up a strip of paper with my scissors ; and also, with the steam drill which bored smooth, round holes in a lump of metal, in the lightest and most graceful manner imaginable, without appearing to give itself the slightest trouble about the matter.

As soon as the whole party was collected together, we went to luncheon ; and a very sumptuous entertainment James had provided for us, I must confess. Turtle soup, cold chickens, fruit, ice, and champagne, however, quickly disappeared before the united forces of about five-and-twenty hungry individuals, for several of our Dumbleton worthies joined us at luncheon, who had not undergone the fatigue of seeing the works. Lady

Venetia made herself more charming than ever, and even surpassed herself in the art of saying pretty things, in the prettiest manner in the world. James seemed to be quite a vanquished man, and I do not think Eliza entirely approved of my brother's unconcealed admiration for the irresistible Lady Venetia. I was rather surprised to find however, that in spite of her Ladyship's openly avowed determination, to win the heart of John Beaumont, that her fascinations seemed to be entirely thrown away upon that insensible and stony-hearted young man. John had never been addicted to the frailty of flirtation, and though, (as Dumbleton young men go) Mr. Beaumont was what might be called quite a "*parti*," he had never hitherto, given any lady reason to suppose for a moment, that he saw in her anything to admire. John was always kind

and good-natured to everybody, but if it became a question of shewing some attention to my pretty niece, Sydney Hope, or to myself, I verily believe John Beaumont would have chosen me of the two. He would have argued that Sydney was young and active, and could take care of herself, while I was weak and lame and helpless ; he would therefore have offered his arm to me, without the slightest hesitation, leaving the little heiress to her fate. I am not saying that John Beaumont was right in thus stopping to argue the point, instead of involuntarily yielding the homage due from all young men of his age, to youth and beauty ; but it serves as an illustration to his character, and it was one reason why I was a little astonished to observe, that though he appeared to be quite invulnerable to the darts that were launched at him from Lady

Venetia's beautiful eyes, yet Mr. Beaumont did not seem averse to a lengthened conversation with the lady on his other side, Miss Honour Verney. It is true, I believe, that he was merely explaining to her the process of hardening steel, but the topic seemed to be one of absorbing interest to both parties concerned; and at last, with a little shrug of contempt, Lady Venetia gave John up as an hopeless case, and devoted herself entirely to my brother, who seemed better able to appreciate her very numerous attractions.

“I really must say,” observed Eliza afterwards, “that I wonder what her Ladyship sees in James, that she should try to make *him* admire her of all people. I consider that when once a woman is married, she had better make up her mind to be contented with her own husband, and not

interfere with other women's husbands. Having been twice married; I think I ought to know something about the matter, and I must do poor Mr. Hope the justice to say, that whatever his faults might have been, he never thought of such a thing as flirting with married women, or, indeed, with any women whatever."

"He had not much opportunity, poor fellow!" said James, laughing. "He saw nobody but the wives of convicts and bush-rangers, who were none of them particularly engaging, I imagine. I will do you the justice to say, Eliza, that you are, at all events, more agreeable than either the one or the other."

"By which I presume, you mean to imply, that I am less agreeable than Lady Venetia Verney," cried Eliza, indignantly.

"I was only referring to the comparative

degree of poor Hope's temptations," replied James. "*He* never saw Lady Venetia, I believe."

"And you have, eh? Oh! yes. I understand it all perfectly, Mr. Lambert. I beg you won't take the trouble to enter into any explanations, they are quite unnecessary, I assure you."

"I am glad you think so," answered James, "for I am afraid I have none to offer you. I cannot oblige you by denying that I think Lady Venetia Verney a singularly beautiful and agreeable woman, and I am quite aware that nothing less than such an admission is likely to satisfy you. I might even, with perfect truth, go so far as to assert that Lady Venetia is the most beautiful and the most agreeable woman I ever met with; moreover as we are likely shortly to be connected with the Verney family, I give you

fair notice, Mrs. Lambert, that I intend to remain on friendly and intimate terms with both Sir Robert and his wife ; and I must beg, that you will not make both yourself and me ridiculous by getting up a fit of jealousy, in consequence of this most natural resolution on my part."

Eliza having nothing further to say, retired to her room in floods of tears, while James threw himself back in his arm-chair and sighed heavily.

CHAPTER X.

LE MARIAGE A LA MODE.

“The bride comes forth! her tears no more are
falling,

To leave the chamber of her infant years;
Kind voices from a distant home are calling;
She comes like day-spring—she hath done with
tears;

Now must her dark eye shine on other flowers,
Her soft smile gladden other hearts than ours!”

MRS. HEMANS.

As the time fixed for Sydney's marriage
drew near, Eliza forgot to cherish her
feelings of jealousy for Lady Venetia Ver-

ney. The trousseau took up all her thoughts and attention, and Lady Venetia's advice and assistance was too valuable to be easily dispensed with. Sydney, at Mr. Hamilton's suggestion, insisted upon asking his cousin's opinion on every point and detail connected with her wedding paraphernalia, and no item was too minute to be submitted to her Ladyship's superior judgment. James, who had an excellent heart, found it better, on second thoughts, to avoid the company of the lady whose charms Eliza had objected to; not, I am convinced, that he felt the slightest danger on his own account, but he honestly desired to avoid giving his jealous wife any cause for alarm or uneasiness.

Mrs. Berresford Broke was, of course, in a state of intense delight at the course affairs had taken, and occupied herself incen-

santly about Sydney's new gowns and bonnets. Latterly, indeed, she seemed almost to have taken up her abode at Contango Abbey, and I believed she managed to make a very good thing of it, for both Eliza and Sydney, in the fulness of their hearts, pressed upon her acceptance a vast number of pretty things which came down from London on approbation, and were pronounced by Selina to be quite too lovely to be restored to their lawful owners.

The Vicar's wife never pretended to be much devoted to parochial matters, and as she made rather a failure of it, when she did undertake any work of that kind, her personal superintendence was not very necessary to the general welfare of Dumbleton.

Margaret Beaumont and Miss Auriol

were, moreover, not only willing and ready, but perfectly competent, to take Mrs. Broke's work off her hands, and she was very properly grateful to them, for so doing.

Since Miss Verney came to the Manor House, she had also offered her services to the Brokes, and Selina gladly took the opportunity of obliging Nora, by resigning to her care her district visiting, and her class in the Sunday school.

Nora, who, having lived chiefly in a country village, had been accustomed to that kind of thing, was really glad of the occupation. She felt sometimes as if she were only in her aunt's way, at the Manor House; nobody seemed to want her there, so she soon began to spend much of her time elsewhere. Lady Venetia made no objection to this plan, so long as Nora was not alone; but she insisted on her finding a

companion in these long rambles. Luckily Margaret Beaumont was always ready to accompany her, and it was seldom that a day passed, without my seeing Nora enter the gates of the Wilderness, which stood just opposite to my windows.

Margaret took a great fancy to Miss Verney; she was so sorry for her, she said. Nora had, it appeared, for some years past, been the devoted nurse and constant companion of an invalid father. Having taken upon herself the entire charge of his affairs, she was older and more thoughtful than a girl of two and twenty generally is; and as Mr. Verney made his daughter read aloud to him, not only the daily papers, but all the best written and most approved publications that appeared, Honour Verney was better informed than most women are, not only upon the current topics of the day, but upon

many other subjects, which do not usually come within the limits of even a modern young lady's education.

When, upon the death of her father, Miss Verney was taken by Sir Robert (her only other near relative), to his own home, she found the society of Lady Venetia and her friends, most uncongenial to her own feelings; nor was the grave and quiet girl in any way formed to be an agreeable companion to her frivolous and worldly-minded aunt. It was, therefore, a relief to both parties when Nora found for herself a real friend in Margaret Beaumont, and employment for her leisure hours, in visiting the poor of Dumbleton. I not unfrequently had the pleasure of a visit from the amiable young lady, and it was quite an enjoyment to me to talk to her, and to hear of all her little interests and pursuits. I found to my

surprise that Miss Verney did not seem to be much pleased with the notion of Sydney's marriage. She appeared to like Sydney very much, and was evidently unwilling to say anything that could by any possibility make the least mischief in the matter, but she was by no means enthusiastic in her praise of Mr. Hamilton, and invariably ended the conversation by saying,—

“Well, I hope it will end happily,” or, “I trust most sincerely that dear Sydney will be a happy woman.”

It did not seem to me that Sydney ever saw much of Mr. Hamilton alone. If they rode, Miss Verney, or Sir Robert were generally of the party; at the Manor House Lady Venetia was always in the room, and Spencer did not, as far as I could trace, often go to Contango Abbey. He was dread-

fully busy, Sydney told me, and had to be a good deal in London, and, as he was to have a holiday for a fortnight, or three weeks, after the wedding, he wished to make himself of as much use to Sir Robert as possible in the interim. Sydney appeared to be perfectly contented with the share she had of his society, and therefore it was no business of mine to interfere ; but it struck me as a little hard on the young couple never to get a quiet walk together, or to have a comfortable conversation, *tête-à-tête*.

It was arranged that the honeymoon should be spent at Midsummer Verney ; and directly after the wedding, James proposed to take Eliza for a tour on the continent, for the winter months, she having never yet had an opportunity of seeing the glories of Paris, or the antiquities of Rome ; and as it would be more convenient to Mr. Hamilton to re-

main near Sir Robert, Contango Abbey was placed at the disposal of the newly-married pair for the next six months at least, during which time, they would be at leisure to engage and furnish a house of their own in London. Though Mr. Hamilton could well have afforded to give up his secretary's appointment on his marriage to our Dumbleton heiress, he at once repudiated any such suggestion ; he hated an idle life, he said, and it would make him miserable to have nothing to do. He had got into Sir Robert's ways now, and a new secretary might be a trouble and annoyance to that gentleman ; he, therefore, greatly preferred to keep his post, and this resolution on his part was much approved of by Sir Robert and by both my brothers, who thought it a very sensible and laudable determination on the part of the young man.

As for Sydney, she agreed to every thing that was proposed to her by Mr. Hamilton, and proved the most accommodating and submissive of brides. She did not care where she lived, or what Spencer did, so long as she was to be with him ; every place would be to her a heaven upon earth if Spencer were but in it ; that was the only opinion that could be extracted from Sydney on the subject.

At length the important hour arrived when we all found ourselves assembled in the old parish church to see our pretty Sydney united to what old novels call, “the man of her heart.” As all weddings are very much alike, I need not particularly describe this one.

The day was fine, though a smart shower fell, just as the bridal cavalcade entered the churchyard, which quickly dispersed

the assembled crowd of curious spectators.

Mr. Auriol went away from Dumbleton on urgent private affairs, the day before the wedding ; but Mr. Broke, assisted by Mr. Hatfield, read the service in his usual impressive manner. The bride was enveloped in the finest Brussels lace, and, so far as we could see, looked exceedingly pretty and very happy.

Mr. Hamilton looked pale and agitated. Sir Robert was as dignified as ever—perhaps, even a little more so, and his salute to the bride, after the ceremony, could not have been more courteously performed by Sir Charles Grandison himself, *in propria personâ*. Eliza was in a motherly flutter and twitter of excitement, and was, as every body allowed, splendidly dressed for the occasion. Lady Venetia looked more lovely than I had ever

yet seen her. She had a sweet, soft, yet rather sad expression on her face, and her colour was quite brilliant, at times, though it varied continually, and sometimes forsook her altogether. It gave me a higher opinion of her Ladyship's heart than I had ever had before.

“After all,” I said to Tom, “these fine ladies and gentlemen are not quite so insensible and thoughtless as they appear to be at first sight. I shall like both Lady Venetia and Mr. Hamilton the better for this little exhibition of feeling — which I am ashamed to own was more than I should have expected from them.”

Miss Verney, who was amongst the group of bridesmaids, also looked more pensive and grave than usual, and I fancied watched her aunt anxiously, though furtively, throughout the whole ceremony. Indeed,

the bride seemed to be to her quite a secondary consideration, compared to Lady Venetia, which I own, puzzled me not a little, as I was well aware that Nora was not particularly attached to her uncle's wife.

When the wedding was over, we all adjourned to Contango Abbey, where a magnificent breakfast was prepared. Speeches were, by general consent, tabooed, and the eating and drinking proceeded merrily, even after the bride had retired to change her dress for the journey to Midsummer Verney. There was a great bustle and confusion as they went away, and I, being rather a poor creature in a crowd, retired to a sofa in a corner behind the drawing-room door, so as to be out of the crush. There was a great deal of hand-shaking and embracing going on, and my warm-hearted little niece came to look for me, saying:—

“ Good-bye, Aunt Patty ; I must not go without giving you another kiss. I shall write to you before long, and tell you how happy I am ! Don’t you think, now, I am the luckiest creature that ever was born ? Is not Spencer a darling ? Oh, if you only knew how good and dear he is, you would indeed think your little Sydney was a fortunate woman ! But he is looking for me. The carriage is waiting—I must go !” and with a hasty kiss she ran off to join her husband, who was saying a few last words to his cousin. He started as Sydney came up, and looked confused and absent, as if he scarcely understood what was going on ; then suddenly recollecting himself, he looked at his watch, and exclaimed that they should be late for the train, and must set off at once.

Sir Robert gave his arm to the bride, and

the rest all followed them to the hall door, so that nobody was left in the drawing-room, but myself.

Presently something occurred that surprised me very much. Lady Venetia came back alone, looking very strangely. Her face was of a death-like pallor, and her features seemed almost distorted, with the efforts she made to appear calm and composed. Not seeing me, in my hiding-place behind the door, her Ladyship seemed to fancy she was alone in the room, and for one moment gave way to a groan which was evidently only forced from her by intense pain, or anguish of mind. She pressed her hand to her side, and seizing a bottle of eau de Cologne, which was on the table, poured it over her hands and her handkerchief, with which she also bathed her temples and lips. Then going to the open window, she stood

leaning out, with her back to me ; but I could see that she gasped for breath and was trembling from head to foot. In spite of my own helplessness, I should have offered to assist Lady Venetia had I not guessed intuitively that she would prefer to remain unnoticed, and in a few minutes the tide of company returned to the room, all laughing and talking merrily.

“Where is Lady Venetia?” inquired Sir Robert. “Oh ! Venetia, I am going to take a walk with young Beaumont. He has promised to show me a very curious piece of machinery, which was not in working order the other day, when we went over the foundry.. Will you come with us ?”

“No thank you ! I am a little tired. I shall go and rest till dinner-time.”

“You look pale, Aunt Via,” said Nora

Verney, anxiously. "I hope you do not feel ill?"

And, when Lady Venetia turned round, I saw that she did indeed look perfectly ghastly.

"Ill? nonsense! Nora. I am never ill. What should make me feel ill?" replied Lady Venetia, sharply. "These green curtains make us all look like ghosts. Go and take a walk with your uncle, and I shall sit and read in the garden, till you come back."

"Would not you like me to stay with you?" persisted Nora, still looking uneasy.

"No! upon no account—I would much rather be alone, I assure you. Make haste! you are keeping your uncle waiting, and Mr. Beaumont too. I hope you will have a pleasant expedition." And with a gesture of ill-concealed impatience, Lady Venetia

waved Nora away from her, and attempted to make her escape through the crowd towards the front door : but this was no easy task. The ladies of Dumbleton were all anxious to seize this favorable opportunity of a little quiet conversation with the great lady.

“ This has been a most interesting day, your Ladyship,” said good Mrs. Duckett. “ I am sure you must have been highly gratified indeed, at this pleasing union, between your noble relative and the very charming young lady whom he has chosen for his bride. May they be happy ! It is a great pleasure to me to see members of the aristocracy forming alliances with those in our own rank of life, as I may say ; and as Mr. Duckett remarked, it does Mr. Spencer Hamilton honour. I am sure he will make an excellent husband : such a fine-looking young man ! and so

pleasant and affable in his manners. Does not your Ladyship consider him a truly amiable person?"

"Oh! yes, certainly. Thank you, Mrs. Duckett—thank you very much. You are very kind. Would you allow me to pass?" answered Lady Venetia, looking perfectly desperate as she saw Mrs. Pybus making towards her, accompanied by her friends the Misses Wolff.

"How do you, Lady Venetia Verney?" cried Mrs. Pybus, holding out her large strong hand, and seizing her prey, like one of those great sea monsters we read of, in the "*Travailleurs de la Mer*," who suck in their victims before they know where they are. "I am glad to have the opportunity of presenting to you my particular friends, the Misses Wolff: Miss Sapientia Wolff, Miss Amelia Wolff, Lady Venetia Verney. This

is one of those occasions when we are all brought together in an agreeable and sociable manner, as it were. My friends have for some time desired to obtain the favour of a little uninterrupted conversation with your Ladyship, if quite convenient to you."

"I regret that we have never had the good fortune to find your Ladyship at home, and disengaged," said Miss Wolff, "though we have called frequently at the Manor House. If you would kindly name a day, I would take care to keep the appointment punctually."

"I fear, I shall be leaving Dumbleton immediately," said the persecuted Lady Venetia, sinking into a chair, and looking the picture of resignation. "It is very unfortunate we should have missed each other so often."

"Perhaps, as you are at leisure, now,

your Ladyship would permit me to explain my motives in calling on you. I am anxious to obtain your Ladyship's signature to a petition which I am getting up. If I might place your Ladyship's name at the head of the list of Dumbleton ladies, it would give me great satisfaction, I can assure you."

"Oh! pray put down my name, if you like it," said Lady Venetia, not understanding the least what it was all about. "I shall be most happy to be of use to any Dumbleton charity. Would five pounds be sufficient for my subscription, or shall I say ten?"

"Subscription! — five pounds!" echoed the astonished Miss Wolff. "Your Ladyship mistakes the nature of the case entirely. If you would use your influence with Sir Robert, and endeavour to persuade him to lay my petition before the House, and to

bring in a Bill for the improvement of the laws of marriage and divorce, I should be truly grateful. But money, my Lady, is not my object."

"At the same time," said Miss Amelia, starting forward, "if your Ladyship *has* five, or ten pounds to bestow in charity, may I call your attention to a little project I am thinking of setting on foot in this parish." Lady Venetia bowed. "I am very desirous, my Lady, of obtaining, second-hand, a few Bath chairs for the benefit of afflicted, aged Christians of either sex, who have, by the mysterious dispensations of Providence, been deprived of the use of their limbs. They might thus be enabled to enjoy the salubrious air of our lovely Common, without fatigue, and even occasionally visit their friends, or attend a place of worship on the Sabbath day. None but recognized, pro-

fessed Christians would of course be allowed to make use of the privilege."

"I shall be very glad, Miss Wolff. The air of the Common is, I think, delightfully refreshing. I quite dote upon it. Pray let me send you ten pounds, to purchase a Bath chair at once. I will certainly speak to Sir Robert, Miss Wolff," added Lady Venetia, turning to Sapiaientia, "about the Marriage Bill, but I really cannot answer for his views on that subject. Good morning—I am afraid I must tear myself away from this charming little party—I have letters to answer." And taking advantage of a slight pause in the conversation, Lady Venetia at length contrived to effect her exit from the house.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LIBERAL CAUSE.

“ Thus by degrees, thy cause superior grew
And the great end appeared at last in view,
We heard the people in thy hopes rejoice ;
We saw the senate bending to thy voice,
The friends of freedom hail’d th’ approaching reign
Of laws, for which their fathers bled in vain.”

AKENSIDE.

AFTER the excitement of Sydney’s wedding was over, Dumbleton gradually settled down to its accustomed, peaceful state of calm repose ; and, indeed, was even less lively than usual—for half the houses on the Common were empty. My brother and

Eliza had gone off to Italy for the winter, and Tom accompanied them as far as Paris. We had the gratification of reading among the "Fashionable departures"—"Lady Venetia Verney, for Adelaide Crescent, Brighton," while Sir Robert remained in London till the end of the Parliamentary Session, when he promised to join her there.

The Vicar and Mrs. Broke, went to spend their holiday at Cleveden Court, at the other side of the county, and very much delighted Selina seemed to get away from Dumbleton. She was, as we were all aware, in a most interesting state of health, and required change of air, and many little comforts which were not to be obtained on her small income at home. We all greatly rejoiced, therefore, on her account, that she had been invited to Lord Cleveden's for a whole month.

It was now August, when most of our

Dumbleton people made it a rule to betake themselves to the sea-side. The Auriols had had their holiday early, and Mr. Hatfield could not take his, till the Vicar returned. Mrs. Kibble was, as usual, prevented from leaving home, by one of those annual accessions to the Kibble family, which generally interfered materially with their plans for the autumn. Margaret Beaumont would not go away, because her brother was particularly busy and could not comfortably leave his work; but John contrived to disappear nearly every Saturday afternoon, only returning the following Monday morning; and Margaret, if questioned on the subject, was apt to look mysterious and to give very vague replies; but she once let out to me, in an unwary moment, that he had been to Brighton, and that he had seen Lady Venetia there, and thought her looking

very ill—quite altered in appearance—I was discreet too—so I said nothing, but like the famous parrot in the story, “I thought the more.”

I rather enjoyed this little time of quiet, and I found myself quite a person of importance among the few of my neighbours who were left behind.

Old Mrs. Duckett often came to sit with me for an hour, and was invariably pleasant and good-humoured.

Mrs. Auriol also, was most attentive, but she was always so perverse and hard to please, that I cannot say I derived much gratification from her visits.

Mrs. Auriol was a good deal put out, that the Brokes had chosen this month, of all others, for their holiday. August was not a pleasant month at Dumbleton, in her opinion, and she would greatly have preferred being

away at that time herself. It was entirely Wilfred's own fault. He would persist in taking his holiday earlier than usual this year; he said, it was more convenient to the Vicar, but she knew very well how it was. Wilfred never told her anything, but she knew that he wanted to get away from this wedding, as well as he did, though he did not choose to confide in her. "It's all very well, my dear Miss Lambert," said the old lady, "for a single woman like you, but nobody knows what a mother has to go through. One begins to feel anxiety about one's children the moment they are born, and one never has a bit of peace with them, till they are all dead—or till one is dead oneself—one or the other. Now Wilfred may say what he likes, about thinking clergymen ought not to marry (what does he say to his own father marrying I should like to know), and he

may talk about his crosses and his self-denials to all eternity, but it's my belief, that if Sydney Hope had spoken three kind words to him, he would have gone down on his bended knees and asked her to marry him there and then. But, he never went the right way to work. Young women expect to have some little pleasing attentions shown them, and not be stared at and frowned at, with never a civil word spoken to them ; and so Wilfred might have guessed, if he had not been the most absent, thoughtless creature that ever existed. As for Agnes, Mrs. Auriol had no patience with her ! She made herself a perfect slave to the poor people ; and was never at home for a moment. If *that* was what she called doing her duty, Mrs. Auriol supposed she must be satisfied, but she certainly thought *she* had as much right to Agnes's company as old

Mrs. Browne, or old Mrs. Green ; and then Mr. Hatfield was in disgrace for coming so often to tea. It was all very well for Wilfred to ask his friends in for once and away, but really Mr. Hatfield had no bounds to his assurance, and came in two, or three times a week on the most trifling pretences. Mrs. Auriol had hinted as plainly as she could that she did not like it, but nobody ever cared what she thought ; and she might as well be a barber's block at once, for any attention that was paid to her opinion.

I did my best to pacify the peevish old lady ; but there are some people in the world to whom grumbling is at the same time a business and a pleasure. If Mrs. Auriol had been forbidden to complain, her life would no longer have been worth having ; and I consoled myself with the hope that having relieved her mind so thoroughly to me, she

would have the less to say, that was disagreeable to her son and daughter, when they came home from their hard day's work in the parish.

So things went on, in a quiet, humdrum way till we were all gratified by the intelligence that Parliament had been dissolved, and that there was to be a general election in the course of the autumn.

This was fine news for Dumbleton ; and much pleasure and excitement, and no little gain to the town, were expected from the prospect of a contested election.

Sir Robert had stood for the Borough unopposed, for so many years, that scarcely even "the oldest inhabitant" could recollect the time when there had last been a contest, and though we, none of us, wished Lord Templecombe success for a moment, yet still, few of us regretted to hear that he intended to

come forward as a candidate for the honour of representing us in Parliament. Even though we certainly meant to decline his proffered services, it was, at the same time, pleasant to find ourselves in such request; and so we smartened up our shops and cleaned the Town Hall inside and out (not before it was wanted), and bought new bonnets, and laid in extra stores of tea and sugar, and took every precaution to be in readiness for the coming struggle. The gentlemen of the Borough formed themselves into committees, and canvassing soon began in good earnest. Public-houses were engaged on either side, and colours were chosen. Blue had ever been the badge of Sir Robert Verney, and pink was now to betoken an interest in Lord Templecombe.

The local papers were filled with squibs and lampoons of the most cutting descrip-

tions, and parties were said to run high. Before many days had elapsed, every dead wall and old paling in the neighbourhood, was placarded with the addresses of the rival candidates.

That of Sir Robert, reminded his old and well-trying supporters of his faithful services to the Borough of Dumbleton, for well nigh a quarter of a century ; and he assured them that he had done nothing to forfeit that confidence which they had for so many years reposed in him.

Lord Templecombe, on the other hand, entreated the indulgence of the free and independent voters of Dumbleton towards one, who, it was true, had been hitherto a stranger to them.

His Lordship proceeded to say, that, whilst opposed to change for the sake of change, he was desirous of removing any

abuses, that might from time to time have crept into our institutions, and that he desired to see practised such a proper and rigid economy of the public expenditure, as should be consistent with the safety and honour of the country ; and should the electors of Dumbleton do him the distinguished honour of choosing him as their representative, Lord Templecombe pledged himself to use every exertion to prove that their confidence had not been misplaced.

Lists of registered voters were exposed to the public gaze, on the church doors and other conspicuous localities. And Mr. Cutbill, a solicitor of a very inferior calibre to Tom, was engaged as agent to Lord Templecombe ; in addition to an unknown and suspicious looking gentleman from London.

Sir Robert and Lady Venetia returned

at once to the Manor House, and the Hamiltons arrived at Contango Abbey, at least ten days sooner than we had expected them. Tom hurried back from Paris, to look after Sir Robert's interests; and the Brokes came home to the Vicarage, accompanied by the Conservative candidate. Not that his Lordship took up his abode with his brother, the Vicar; for, as Mrs. Broke very justly remarked, with their income, it was totally impossible to entertain visitors in the house; but they ordered the best rooms at the Peacock, to be placed at his Lordship's disposal; and desired worthy Mrs. Phillpotts to supply him with the best of everything, (at his own expense of course.)

Lord Templecombe occasionally dined at the Vicarage, to meet all the magnates of the land, always taking care, however, to send in a haunch of venison, or a couple of

brace of grouse, the day before, together with a few dozen bottles of wine; so that our dearly cherished Brokes were never put to any great expense in entertaining their noble relative. Indeed, *we* should have taken care of that; and all the spare game, fruit, and poultry in Dumbleton, found its way into the Vicarage larder that autumn; it was so hard upon poor, dear Mrs. Broke, to have to give dinners for the benefit of Lord Templecombe, as we unanimously observed, whenever the subject was mooted. Lord Templecombe was an exceedingly goodnatured young man, so much so, that his brother, the Vicar, in his pleasant way, often said, that "Tempy would willingly take off his skin and give it to you, if you only asked him for it." The brothers were excellent friends, and though Mr. Broke never neglected his parish duties

(making a practice of spending his mornings in the town, and generally devoting one evening in the week to the preparation of a sermon for the ensuing Sunday), still, in the afternoon, the Vicar could easily find time to enjoy a drive on the box of his brother's drag, which, with its four attendant horses, was comfortably ensconced in the spacious stables of the Peacock. The Peacock having formerly been a great posting house, was famous for its excellent stabling, and this consideration probably inclined Lord Templecombe to make it his head quarters, instead of going to the more fashionable Alexandra.

The Alexandra, however, was not entirely neglected, for a handsome suite of apartments were taken at that hotel for Lady Venetia Verney's widowed sister, the Lady Diana Hartland; who, shortly afterwards

came down to Dumbleton, accompanied by her particular friend and invariable companion Mrs. Bowyer Dawkins. Lady Diana was not so generally admired as Lady Venetia; but she was very handsome in a dark, gipsy kind of picturesque way. She had a very fine figure, rode beautifully, and drove a mail phaeton, drawn by a pair of all but unmanageable horses. Lady Die had, like her sister, married to please her father rather than herself; but in some respects she had been more fortunate than Lady Venetia. In the first place, she had had no previous attachment to overcome, and in the second, old Mr. Hartland had been obliging enough to die at the expiration of two years, leaving his widow, not only her liberty, but a very considerable property in addition.

Diana Hartland was also happy in the

possession of a faithful dog, an attached friend, and a constant lover.

The dog was a supernaturally hideous monster, yclept a turn spit, with an interminable body, no particular legs, and a large head. His joints appeared to have been all dislocated early in life, so that poor "Mr. Quilp" presented a lamentable appearance, and gave one quite the idea of the crippled and deformed dwarf, which his name suggested. Lady Diana, nevertheless, doted upon this ungainly creature, and I must own that Quilp returned her affection with all the powers of dog devotion of which his large heart was capable.

Lady Diana's friend was a certain Mrs. Bowyer Dawkins, a distant relative (some said a natural daughter) of the late Mr. Hartland. This lady had been for many years separated from her husband, who had declined

to divorce her, for two reasons; one was, that he objected to the publicity of such a step; and the other was, that he did not care enough about his wife to allow her the gratification of marrying his rival. So Mrs. Bowyer Dawkins took up her abode with the wealthy young widow, and amused herself by taking away the character of every woman, who happened to be unfortunate enough to fall under the ban of her displeasure. She did it in a light, careless, easy manner, it is true; but she did it none the less effectually for that. Mrs. Dawkins, was in short, a gossiping, ill-natured woman, who

“Laughed at the reputations she had torn,
And held them dangling at arm’s length in scorn.”

Lady Diana’s lover was no other than Lord Templecombe, who had paid her the most marked attentions ever since old Mr.

Hartland died, and, indeed, for some months before that happy event occurred. Whether Lady Die ever intended to put the infatuated young man out of his misery, remained, at the period of her first arrival in Dumbleton, extremely problematical. Indeed, as it was greatly to the interest of Mrs. Bowyer Dawkins, to prevent her friend from marrying again, the chances were very much against poor Lord Templecombe.

CHAPTER XII.

A BLOATED ARISTOCRAT.

“For Florio was not meant by nature,
A silly or a worthless creature,
He had a heart disposed to feel,
Had life and spirit, taste and zeal;
Was handsome, generous; but by fate
Predestined to a large estate!”

MRS. HANNAH MORE.

MEANWHILE, the canvassing for both candidates proceeded briskly.

John Beaumont filled with universal satisfaction, the office of chairman to Sir Robert's committee, while Mrs. Kibble's

brother, Mr. Parkins the wealthy tobacconist, who resided at High Elms on the Common, consented to act in that capacity for Lord Templecombe. His Lordship happened to be one of Mr. Parkins's best customers ; indeed, all Mr. Parkins's best customers were members of the aristocracy ; and he thought it his duty to support them in return, whenever he could get the opportunity. Now Sir Robert did not smoke, and Mr. Parkins had not always entirely approved of that statesman's political views. On one occasion, Sir Robert had voted for a measure which tended to lower the duty on tobacco, and had thereby done Mr. Parkins a serious injury. It so happened at the time that Parkins had by him a large quantity of tobacco, upon which he consequently lost a considerable sum.

Mrs. Pybus, Mr. Parkins's aunt, and Mrs.

Kibble, his sister, did not however quite like the step he had taken, in thus acting as chairman of Lord Templecombe's committee. These ladies objected so strongly to the doctrines promulgated by the Vicar, and also to the frivolous conduct of his wife, that they could not conscientiously say, they wished to see a brother of Mr. Broke's become member for Dumbleton, and they felt it their painful duty to remonstrate very earnestly with Mr. Parkins on the subject.

But Mr. Parkins would not listen to reason. He had been asked to be chairman of his Lordship's committee, and chairman of his Lordship's committee, Mr. Parkins meant to be, even if he were condemned to eternal punishment by all his female relatives in consequence of such a step. Things went, indeed, very nearly to this length, when, after a very severe rebuke from Mr.

Kibble himself, Mr. Parkins turned upon his brother-in-law, as even a worm will occasionally turn, and called that holy man a humbug ; and not only a humbug, but a humbug with a very wicked epithet attached to it, which conveys the idea of everlasting perdition in one syllable, and comes under the head of strong language. After this terrible scene, it was of course not meet that Mr. Parkins should continue to sit under Mr. Kibble in the reserved seats at the Iron Church, and the Parkinses henceforward attended divine service at S. Monica's, where they sat humbly among their own maids and gardeners, and gave largely to the offertory afterwards. The ladies of the Parkins family highly approved of this step. The bonnets at S. Monica's were most undoubtedly more fashionable than those at Bartholomew's, and the music and chanting there

were more lively than the hymns sung at the latter place of worship. Then too, Sophia Parkins, a young lady with very decided opinions of her own, thought Mr. Auriol an interesting, young man, and very delicate and refined looking—so much so, that she contrived to make acquaintance with his sister, and to establish visiting relations with the Auriol family. Mrs. Parkins also appreciated the orthodox religious opinions, which her husband had suddenly espoused, and she loudly proclaimed in all companies, her new, high church principles. She thought them so ladylike and so superior in every way to Mr. Kibble's low church doctrines, which were she said, "*low* in every sense of the word," and as it was generally supposed that Conservative views and Ritualistic views always went together in Dumbleton, Mrs.

Parkins encouraged her husband in staunchly upholding the Church and State.

Having had the pleasure of entertaining Lord Templecombe at luncheon, Mrs. Parkins pronounced that the interests of the Borough could not possibly be placed in better hands than those of his Lordship.

He had called little Arthur a fine fellow, and had promised to take him for a drive on his drag, and he had kissed little Rose and told her she was a great darling, and had given her a gold trinket off his own watch-chain, a little harlequin with joints that moved, and the dear child had been quite delighted. Altogether Mrs. Parkins felt bound to admit that she never met with a more sensible and discriminating young man, or one who was likely to reflect greater credit on the electors of Dumbleton if he

should happen to prove the successful candidate.

In fact, the greater number of the ladies of Dumbleton were secretly anxious that Lord Templecombe should be their representative. Lady Venetia was undoubtedly very handsome and very charming, but Sir Robert was reckoned "high" if not haughty, in his manner, and after all, he was neither young, nor good-looking. His private secretary too, who had certainly possessed both these desirable qualifications in a very striking degree, was now married, and had consequently fallen twenty per cent. in the market, and was decidedly below par. So fluctuating were the favours of the female population of Dumbleton.

It was all very well for Mr. Parkins and his friends to boast of their candidate. I have not the slightest doubt that they

exerted themselves strenuously, on Lord Templecombe's behalf. But my brother Tom and John Beaumont always declared from the first, that the Conservatives had no chance at all, in Dumbleton. The fact was, that by far the larger portion of the inhabitants of the Borough depended more, or less, for a livelihood, upon the works of the Proserpine Iron and Steel Company. Many hundred men were employed at these works, and they were, most of them, in receipt of very high wages, and as after the manner of their order, they lived well, dressed well, and spent their money freely at the Dumbleton shops, it was a matter of no small importance to the petty tradesmen of the Borough to please their customers in every way that lay in their power, even to the choice of their member.

If John Beaumont could have been persuaded to offer himself as a candidate for

Dumbleton, he would have been returned almost unanimously ; but John preferred to devote himself to his business, and to leave the affairs of the nation in more experienced hands than his own.

Though no doubt, a few quarrels were likely to ensue in Dumbleton upon a contested election, these were chiefly confined to the higher classes of the inhabitants ; while among the artisans and mechanics there seemed likely to be no rioting, very little bribery, and not more idleness and drunkenness, than are absolutely necessary under the circumstances.

The Proserpine men were all keen politicians, and were eager for a Liberal member—not so much with any hope of gaining a few pounds thereby, as from a really earnest desire to see Liberal principles upheld in the country, and to secure a vote for the

new Reform Bill, which was not unlikely to be brought forward during the next Parliamentary Session.

Some of these men were upon Sir Robert's committee, and were indefatigable in their endeavours to secure the return of their favourite candidate.

One man, of the name of Redfern, particularly distinguished himself in gaining votes for the Liberal party; and I was a little amused one afternoon, on calling at the Manor House, to hear Lord Templecombe's account of an unsuccessful effort he had made to canvass this honest and straightforward fellow.

Lady Venetia was sitting on the lawn with her sister, and John Beaumont was also there, waiting to speak to Sir Robert, who had gone out riding with his niece, when his Lordship was announced.

"I tell you what it is, Beaumont," said he, after a little conversation, "I believe I shall never make much hand of my canvassing. I am tired to death of the whole thing, and I have a great mind to write to my father and tell him that I had better give it up at once."

"Indeed, I think you had," said Lady Venetia. "Why don't you? Everybody agrees that you have not the slightest chance of success."

"It's all your fault, Beaumont," proceeded Lord Templecombe. "Those rascally workmen of yours are all dead against me. I declare, I don't know what I've done to the fellows, that they should hate me so. I am the most good-natured man alive. Ask Berresford if I am not? And yet these imps of yours tell me to my face, that I am an oppressor, and a tyrant, and that I grind

the faces of the poor. Now can you imagine anything more unjust? I am the last man in the world likely to grind the faces of the poor. I should never take so much trouble. I am sure, I like nothing better than to see everybody comfortable and happy. If I had my will, I would put all their children into Orphan Asylums, or Idiot Asylums, on the spot—whichever they liked best; and as for their aged mothers, they should have an almshouse apiece to-morrow, if I had it to give them. It's not my fault if the men choose to drink themselves to death, and then go into the union—though, as for that, they are welcome to live upon chicken and champagne, every day in the week, when they get there, so far as I am concerned. And now they tell me that I wish to deprive them of their rights, and that I trample upon their privileges. Now this is too absurd

you know. I trample upon them ! Why I never, to my knowledge, trampled upon so much as a worm—indeed, after some lines I once learnt at school about a crunched beetle feeling as much pain as a man, (or even more, I think they said, than a man of moderate height,) I have been so particularly careful where I tread ; and if I ever do happen to meet a black beetle walking about, I always go a mile out of my way, to avoid stepping on him, poor devil ! So you know it really is rather hard to accuse me, of all people, of blood-thirsty cruelty. Even *you*, Lady Diana, don't believe me guilty of anything of that sort—do you ?”

“Oh ! do go on, please, Lord Templecombe ; you are too ridiculous ! Now tell us what you said to these poor, dear, delightful working men ! How I admire working men ! They do seem to be so very original,” said Lady Diana.

“I hope they did not think Sir Robert trampled upon them too,” added Lady Venetia.

“Law, bless you, no! Sir Robert was everything that was excellent and praiseworthy, and Sir Robert was to give them the franchise, and everything else, they wanted. There was nobody to be compared to Sir Robert, except Beaumont. I am not sure if Beaumont did not come before Sir Robert. There was one fellow I went to (a great card among them). What did they call him? Greenleaf, I think it was. Do you know a fellow of the name of Greenleaf, Beaumont? He lives in a little kind of villa place, outside the town—a well-to-do sort of man, I should say. He has got a vote.”

“I dare say you mean Redfern, my Lord. He is one of my foremen, and has saved

money and built himself a pretty cottage out beyond the Iron Church."

"That's the man. Well! this Greenleaf, or Redleaf, or whatever you call him, pitched into me right and left. I went down to ask for his vote, and there was your friend in a most charming kind of little boudoir, beautifully furnished, with lots of books, and pictures, and china vases, and all that sort of thing, about the room. I affronted the fellow frightfully, by telling him he had got a delightful villa. It only wanted one addition, as far as I could see, to make it the most complete thing of the kind in England, and that was a billiard-room. 'Get a billiard-room built, and a good table, and a gas lamp overhead,' I said to him, 'and I don't wish for a snugger little box than you'll make of it. And, mind you, Greenleaf,' I said, 'get it done well, when you are about it, and

send the bill in to me, d'ye hear? Don't stick at expense,' I said, 'let's do the thing handsomely.' You should have seen the man's face of horror and righteous indignation. You must confess, Beaumont, that your friend Greenleaf's

“ ‘Manners have not that repose
Which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere.’ ”

Otherwise, I have no doubt whatever that he is an excellent man.”

“ But did you get his vote ? ” asked Lady Venetia anxiously.

“ Get his vote ! No, nothing of the sort ! The man as good as told me he'd see me hanged first. No, the fellow abused me roundly for three quarters of an hour, by his own, very slow, old-fashioned clock, and talked about the rights and wrongs of the working classes, till I scarcely knew at last

whether I stood on my head, or my heels. He referred me to some very curious and novel institutions, as a proof that the working men knew how to govern the country better than I did. One, I think, was called the 'Amalgamated Unities,' and the other the 'Amicable Stores.' Fortunately I discovered that the 'Amicable Stores,' was merely a grocer's shop, so I went there and laid in stores of tea and sugar—enough to last my mother's housekeeper for the next six months. Such a package as arrived for me at the 'Peacock!' I did not know what on earth to do with it, and it made my room smell just like an 'Amicable Store' too, so at last I gave the 'Boots' half-a-crown to carry it away on a truck to my sister-in-law, and I believe Selina is quite delighted with it, and so you see, as it happened, that all did very well; but what the 'Amalga-

mated Unities' are, is more than I have been able to make out."

"Can I explain it to you, my Lord?" said John Beaumont, laughing. "I suspect you have got rather into a confusion between the two. 'The Amalgamated, Proserpine, Provident Association' is only a kind of benefit club for the sick workmen employed at our works; and the 'Proserpine, Amicable, Unity, Co-operative Society' is, as your Lordship observed, simply a grocer's shop belonging to a kind of little joint stock company among our men."

"Dear! how nice!" exclaimed Lady Venetia. "Might not I have a share and get some stores too? I should like it so much. How much does a share cost?"

"Only a pound," replied John Beaumont; "but I think you had better defer your speculations till after the election

is over, or you will be accused of bribery, perhaps."

"Well! then I suppose I must wait; but after that, I am determined to belong to the 'Proserpine Amicable, etc., etc.' Die, won't you take some shares, dear?"

"If you are intending to take shares with any view of its being a charitable thing to do," said John, "I would advise you to give up the plan at once. The 'Proserpine Co-operative Store' is a very thriving concern, and they won't thank you for your patronage."

"Oh! but dear Mr. Beaumont, I don't want to patronise them. I only want to belong to it, just for the pleasure of the thing," said Lady Venetia. "I will give you five pounds some day, and you must get me five shares, and pray see that I get all my dividends properly."

“Yes! and you’ll have to take a lot of odd-looking tin things—a sort of false money, to show how much you have bought, you know,” said Lord Templecombe. “I had my pocket full of them, and what to do with them I had not a notion, so at last I gave them to some small boys in the street, and told them to make what they could of them, and they laughed in my face.”

“Your friend Redfern is to speak, I believe, at the great meeting at the Town Hall,” said John Beaumont.

“Dear creature! then I shall see him,” said Lady Venetia. “Sir Robert says, we may all go. He has invited some of the ladies of Dumbleton to go into a gallery, and we are to have reserved seats, and I am dying to see the man who refused a billiard-room, and who sticks to Sir Robert in spite of you, Lord Templecombe. It’s quite

touching of him, and I am sure we never can make enough of him."

"He won't give you the opportunity, I am afraid, Lady Venetia," said John. "George is not a man who likes being made much of."

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. BOWYER DAWKINS.

“ Give me th’ avowed, the erect, the manly foe,
Bold I can meet—perhaps may turn his blow ;
But of all plagues, good Heaven, thy wrath can send,
Save, save, oh ! save me from the *candid* friend !”

MR. CANNING.

Soon after I heard of Sydney’s return to the Abbey, I went up one morning to see her. She was alone, and appeared delighted to welcome me, and insisted on my sending Jenny away, and remaining with her for the rest of the day.

Spencer was gone to town, she said, and would not be at home till dinner time, and she should be really glad of my company. Sydney looked, I thought, prettier than ever, but she was altered both in look and manner, and at first I felt a little disappointed in her. However, she declared that she was very happy, and that she loved Spencer ten thousand times better than ever. Nothing could be so good and kind as he was, and she was very, very sorry to leave Midsummer Verney so soon. It was a beautiful place, and she had walked and ridden all over the country with Spencer, and it had been quite delightful. Now, Spencer had a good deal to do for Sir Robert; and was not able to be much with her. I still thought her manner a little more stiff and reserved than it used to be, but she soon became engrossed in hearing of all that had happened in Dumbleton

during her absence ; and after she had read me the last letters from James and Eliza, she presently grew quite cheerful and natural again. While we were chatting merrily over the events of the day, or at least the events of the Dumbleton day, the door bell rang violently.

“I dare say it is only Selina Broke,” said Sydney. “Don’t run away, dear Aunt Patty. You will like to see Selina.”

But to my alarm, the door was thrown open, and “Lady Diana Hartland and Mrs. Bowyer Dawkins” were announced in a pompous tone by Sydney’s new butler. Before we had time to consider the matter, in came the two ladies, and I was completely caught. I had not courage to get up and walk out of the room while they were there, so I hid myself behind a screen, and made a signal to Sydney not to betray me. Lady Diana

was decidedly handsome, but as dark and swarthy as a gipsy, with large, bright, black eyes, and hair of that beautiful raven hue which makes blue and purple shadows. "Well, Mrs. Spencer Hamilton," she began, "I have come to call upon you, you see! I told Spencer I should come. I am his cousin, you know; and he and I, have always been on excellent terms. This is my friend Augusta Dawkins. She is also, a very old acquaintance of Spencer's. It seems so odd to think of Spencer having a wife—does it not, Augusta?"

"He is the last man I should have suspected of marrying in this sudden way; but I dare say it will all do very well," said Mrs. Dawkins.

"And so this is your house, is it?" asked Lady Diana.

"It is my stepfather's house," said Sydney.

“He has gone abroad, and has lent it to us for the winter. It is so convenient for Spencer to be near Sir Robert.”

“Oh! very, I dare say,” said Mrs. Dawkins, in a harsh, disagreeable voice. (She was a woman of nearly fifty, and without the slightest pretensions to good looks). “I have no doubt Spencer’s duties will always require him to live near Sir Robert Verney; and when you go to town, what shall you do then?” said Mrs. Bowyer Dawkins, in such an impertinent way, that I longed to shake her.

“I really have not thought about that yet,” replied Sydney quietly. “We have only just returned from Midsummer Verney, and have not at all settled our plans for the future.”

“Ah! I have no doubt you will take a house in the neighbourhood of Belgrave

Square. I think Spencer will find he has to be near Sir Robert again," said Mrs. Dawkins.

"Having always lived in the house with Sir Robert hitherto, you know," added Lady Diana, "of course it would be most inconvenient to be far away, would it not? And so you see a great deal of Venetia, I suppose, don't you?"

"I generally see Lady Venetia every day," said Sydney looking embarrassed. "Pray, Lady Diana, are your rooms comfortable at the Alexandra?"

"Are we comfortable, Augusta? I really never know; I don't think, somehow, I am a comfortable kind of person. As long as Mr. Quilp is contented, I am; and I should say, he rather enjoyed being here. He likes running about on the Common. I left him in the carriage, for I did not know whether you might have any cats in the house, and

Quilp hates cats. Yes ! I suppose we rather like being here, upon the whole—don't we, Augusta ?”

“ Mr. Quilp confided to me this morning that he thought the bones at the ‘ Alexandra ’ were decidedly small, and apt to be very bare,” answered Mrs. Dawkins gravely. “ But I should say we do very well here. The cookery is not first rate, of course.”

“ Ah ! by-the-bye ! that puts me in mind,” said Lady Diana, “ that we are all coming to dine with you to-morrow—arn't we ?”

“ Indeed !” said Sydney, looking surprised. “ I am very glad to hear it ; but I did not know it before.”

“ Oh ! We met Spencer this morning, and settled it with him. It's all right, you'll find.”

“ I think he had settled it with Lady

Venetia before we saw him," said Mrs. Dawkins. "He had been to the Manor House, it seems, and finding Sir Robert was to dine in town to-morrow, he asked Via to meet us here. You have no objection, I trust, Mrs. Hamilton?"

"Oh! dear, no! only I wish——I mean——I suppose Spencer will tell me all about it, when he comes home——I fear——"

"You wish! you mean! you suppose! you fear! Does that mean that you fear it will be a horrid bore having us, my dear Mrs. Hamilton?" persisted Mrs. Dawkins, "and that you wish us to stay away?"

"Here comes Via," exclaimed Lady Diana, as that lady suddenly made her appearance at the window.

"Ah! Die, you here! Well, my dear little Sydney, how are you this morning? I bring you a message from Spencer. He called on

me on his way to the station, and we have been thinking what a good thing it would be, to ask Lord Templecombe to dinner. Sir Robert does not like to have him at the Manor just now, but Spencer could ask him here. We can't help fancying that he could easily be persuaded to retire altogether; so Spencer is to get him to come and meet that Mr. Beaumont, our chairman, and then we must have Mr. Broke, and another man or two, and we will all come and do the honours for you, so you will have no trouble about the matter."

"Thank you, I don't mind the trouble at all," said Sydney, hesitating; "but I think Spencer will arrange it all better than I shall. I expect him home early this evening."

"Arrange it, my dear child! but I tell you it is arranged already. Spencer wrote

to Lord Templecombe from our house, and told him to send his answer straight to me. Here it is ! He is delighted, you see. Die and Augusta, you will both come, of course ; and you must write a note, dear Sydney, to Mr. Broke at once. Don't ask his wife. She is such a silly little woman. She bores me to death."

"Oh ! no, pray don't let us have any more women," added Lady Diana ; "there are too many of us already ; and Mrs. Broke was a Marsham, was not she ? so she *must* be a fool, poor thing !"

"Selina Broke is a very old friend of mine," observed Sydney. "I don't think her particularly silly."

"Don't you, indeed ! I am not surprised at that !" said Mrs. Dawkins sarcastically, with a glance of amusement at Lady Diana. "I suppose nobody ever does think their par-

ticular friend ‘particularly silly.’ But you need not ask her to come to-morrow, need you? You will have other opportunities of doing the civil thing to her, I dare say.”

“We must have a man, or two, though,” said Lady Venetia; “that is inevitable. Who is there? Mr. Beaumont will come, of course; I shall see him, I dare say, in the course of the day, and I will tell him not to fail us; and who else is there? Nobody but the curates, I suspect, that one can ask to dinner.”

“Oh! defend us from the curates,” ejaculated Lady Diana. “I can’t talk to a curate—they are always so dull and slow.”

“I am afraid we must have one of them to make up an even number,” said Lady Venetia. “But you need not speak to him, Die, if you don’t like it. Nora can take charge of him. She rather likes that sort of thing.

I suppose Mr. Auriol, the High Churchman, is the best of the set. At all events, he is a gentleman, and we feel bound to be civil to him, because our old Aunt Honoria built his church for him, you know. Well! then that is all settled, and you will write these notes directly, childy," she added, turning to Sydney, "for there is no time to be lost. Now don't look so puzzled, my dear; you will never do for an under-secretary's wife, if you don't learn to get up these sort of little dinners at a moment's warning; and you know we have all made up our minds to see Spencer an under-secretary one of these days. Just get the notes ready then, pet, will you, and my man shall call for them, as he goes into Dumbleton, and wait for the answers. You are sure you quite understand now. You are to ask *Mr.* Broke (not Mrs. Broke), and Mr. Auriol. If either of these should

refuse, we must fall back upon the athletic man, who is always playing at cricket on the Common. I forget his name ; and by-the-bye, it might be as well for you to write one line to Mr. Beaumont, in case I should miss him. He is a most important ingredient to our party."

"But——," began Sydney, hesitating—

"But what, my dear child ? I assure you there is not the slightest difficulty about the matter. If your cook can't manage a dinner for ten people, you had better send her away at once, I should say. I can send in my man, if you have any misgivings about her powers of cooking, and he will soon put her a little in the way of things."

"If Mrs. Spencer Hamilton were the least aware, for how many years you have been in the habit of managing Spencer's affairs," said Mrs. Dawkins, "I am sure she would

feel quite comfortable. These two ladies, my dear Mrs. Hamilton, began to take the entire charge of their cousin, long before you were born, or even thought of, I dare say ; so you need feel no uneasiness on his account. Whatever Lady Venetia vouchsafes to order, cannot fail to meet with your husband's most entire approbation."

"Die," said Lady Venetia, looking annoyed, "you will come and see me, won't you? We can go in through the garden. We have had a little gate made in the paling, so that we can run in and out of each other's houses whenever we like. It is so pleasant, is it not, darling? Now I shall send Charles in for the notes in about ten minutes. You will have them ready for him, my child."

"Then goodbye, little one," said Lady Diana; "I shall see you again to-morrow."

“ Goodbye, Mrs. Spencer Hamilton,” echoed Mrs. Bowyer Dawkins. “ I am enchanted to have made your acquaintance. Tell Spencer I think you quite charming. I should like to keep you under a glass shade upon my chimney-piece. Nobody would ever believe you were not a real, old Dresden shepherdess, I am convinced.”

No sooner had the ladies left the room, than poor Sydney fairly burst into tears.

“ Oh ! Aunt Patty,” she said ; “ you see how it is ! They pretend to think me a mere silly child—a perfect baby, in hopes of making Spencer despise me. That is just what Lady Venetia always does. It is wicked of them. She may not mean to be cruel, but she must know what harm it does me in Spencer’s eyes to be treated as if I were an idiot, without a single idea in my head. Why do they do it ? I thought Lady Venetia

wished him to marry me. She never could make enough of me, before it was all settled ; and even up to the day of our wedding, she seemed so kind and friendly ; but she does not like me now. I see it plainly—and her letters were so odd—always writing to him—never to me—and telling him to ‘be very good to me, for I was a great pet of hers.’ As if he had married me for that reason !”

“But he *is* good to you, Sydney ?” I asked, a little anxiously. “You have found him all you could wish—have you not ?”

“Oh ! yes—he is very, very kind to me, Aunt Patty. There never was a more amiable, dear, good darling than Spencer is, if they would only let him alone—he made me so happy at Midsummer Verney. We rode together, and he taught me to drive, and he read to me sometimes, and indeed I

think in time, I could understand him well enough to be of great use to him. He let me copy some letters for him one day. It was so interesting to me, though I had not a notion what they were about; but I liked so much to be of use to Spencer, you know; and he was quite pleased with the way I did them, and told me I was as good as a clerk to him."

"Well! you see, Sydney, your husband does not think you an idiot by any means; that is very clear."

"Oh! but, Aunt Patty, you don't quite understand it all yet. You see Spencer likes me—I do believe he does—in a sort of way; but he still thinks there is no woman on earth to be compared to Lady Venetia. He thinks more of her than he does of anybody else in the world. He asks her opinion about everything, and takes it too, always.

Sometimes I could not help saying I did not agree with her, just to see if Spencer would give in to me, even in a very small point ; but he never would. He only laughed at first, and asked me what I knew about the matter, and if I persisted, or argued about it, he seemed a little annoyed, and told me not to talk nonsense. He can't bear me even to wear anything, or to say anything that Lady Venetia would not quite like ; and now, Aunt Patty, I ask you is that pleasant for a wife ?”

CHAPTER XIV.

“THE LITTLE RIFT WITHIN THE LUTE.”

“In Love, if Love be Love ; if Love be ours,
Faith and unfaith can ne’er be equal powers ;
Unfaith in aught is want of faith in all.

“It is the little rift within the lute,
That by and by will make the music mute,
And ever widening slowly silence all.”

TENNYSON.

I WISHED to be very cautious in my answer to this question, for I knew, by experience, what misery both to herself and to my brother, Eliza’s jealous temper had often caused, and I could not help hoping that

Sydney might have exaggerated the extent of Lady Venetia's influence over Mr. Hamilton.

So I began gently.

“ But, my dear Sydney, are you quite sure that you don't fancy a great deal of all this ? I remember your mother was quite put out at one time, because she thought James admired Lady Venetia. But you know it was all nonsense, and it was really a pity she said anything about it, before us all. It made me feel quite awkward and uncomfortable, I can assure you, and I felt for my brother, who had not a thought of anything, beyond just liking to talk to a very handsome, agreeable, clever woman. Men do like to talk to pretty women, my love, all the world over, and if their wives are always to take it amiss, why it will be sure to bring a good deal of uncomfortable feeling to all

parties. I can't help thinking, Sydney, my dear, that the less you let Mr. Hamilton see your foolish, little, jealous fancies the better.”

“Oh! Aunt Patty, do you really think they are only foolish, jealous fancies? I hope they are! How happy I should be, if I could be sure you were right. I don't believe there would exist a happier creature than I should be, if I only felt perfectly certain that Spencer really does love me best.

“But, Aunt Patty, you heard how they all ordered me about, and told me to write notes to this person and that person, and took it for granted, they were going to dine here, without asking me—I don't like that—I can not help thinking that Spencer might prevent their doing so, if he knew how much I dislike it. If Spencer had only said to me—‘Sydney, I should like to ask Lady

Venetia, and Lady Diana, and Mrs. Dawkins to dinner; who can we have to meet them?' I should have been too delighted to have pleased him by agreeing at once, most cordially, and trying to arrange the whole thing as well as possible; but you must own, Aunt Patty, it was rather cool of them to come in, in that sort of way, as if the house was their own, and I was merely their house-keeper."

"I must confess, I do think, Sydney, you ought to be the mistress of your own house," I replied, "and I believe you might easily shew Lady Venetia and her sister, very quietly, but firmly, that you think you are the first person to be consulted on these occasions, for the future."

"But if Spencer should be angry, Aunt Patty? Ah! you don't know half how much he thinks of Lady Venetia. He says,

nobody understands him so well as she does, and that nobody has such good sense, or such good taste, or so much tact as she has. He quotes her opinion upon all occasions. If I were to offend her, Aunt Patty, I could not answer for the consequences. Spencer would be so terribly vexed. I know he would.”

“Her Ladyship’s groom has called for some notes, ma’am,” said the new butler, entering the room at this moment; “he is going into Dumbleton, and will leave the answers here, as he comes back.”

Mr. Fullinger had been brought up under the auspices of the ducal groom of the chambers at the Manor House, and had imbibed much of that functionary’s stateliness of manner. He had been Lady Venetia’s own footman, and was highly recommended by her to the young couple on their first

attempt at housekeeping, as a singularly excellent and trustworthy head servant. I own to having a great respect, not unmingled with awe, for Mr. Fullinger; but I plucked up courage to say, in a voice, which I fear trembled perceptibly,—

“Your notes are not ready, my dear. I think you had better let me send them down by my boy—he has nothing to do, and then you need not detain Lady Venetia’s servant.”

“It was her Ladyship’s order, ma’am, that Charles should call for the notes, and wait for the answers,” said Mr. Fullinger, not deigning to treat my humble suggestion as worthy of notice.

“Tell Charles not to wait, then,” said Sydney decidedly. “Surely one of our own men can take the notes into Dumbleton.”

“You desired John to exercise your horse, Ma’am, I believe, and I sent Thomas to the

tailor's with a message from Mr. Hamilton, and the gardeners are gone to their dinner,” answered Mr. Fullinger, with an air of supreme contempt.

“Why can't the coachman take one of the horses and go with the notes to Dumbleton?”

“If the coachman goes out now, he won't be back in time to drive you this afternoon, ma'am. You ordered the carriage at three o'clock.”

“Well! never mind, I won't have the carriage then. Tell the coachman at once that he is to go with my notes. I will ring when they are ready.”

“Very well, Ma'am; but Charles is in no particular hurry. He could wait half-an-hour if you desired it.”

“I do not desire it, at all. I would rather send my own messenger, thank you. Send

Charles off at once. We are detaining him too long already."

Mr. Fullinger looked a little astonished, and a good deal hurt, at this arrangement, but left the room with all the dignity he could command, on the spur of the moment, and we soon afterwards were made aware by the clatter of hoofs in the stable-yard, that Charles had been despatched about his business.

"And now, I suppose I really must write to Mr. Broke," said Sydney, with a sigh so deep, that it almost amounted to a groan. "But how odd Selina will think it. I am sure she will be quite annoyed about it! I wonder what I had better say. I must explain that we have, quite unexpectedly, a large party of ladies coming to dinner, and I hope he will take pity upon us, as we are at a loss for some gentlemen to meet them.

I know what Selina will say, so well ; and then Lord Templecombe is coming too, and Selina likes so much to meet him ; and she will be left all alone, poor dear. Oh ! how I wish I might go and dine with Selina, and leave all these fine ladies to entertain each other. How much happier I should be—should I not, Aunt Patty ?”

“But that would never do, dear. Could you not write to Selina, and explain it to her, and ask her to lend you Mr. Broke for one evening, as a particular favour. I think she would not mind so much, if you put it in that way. Call it an electioneering dinner, if you like.”

“But Selina thinks herself a great hand at electioneering—and then the dinner is to be for Lord Templecombe, and Spencer’s interest is all on the other side, or ought to be. Oh dear ! Oh dear ! I think I’ll write the

other notes first. There ! one line will do for John Beaumont, and another for Mr. Auriol ; and now luncheon is ready. I'll tell you what, Aunt Patty, I will not ask Mr. Broke at all, but get Spencer to do it when he comes home—as if from himself, you know ; and then, if Selina says anything to me, I can tell her I really had nothing at all to do with it. That would be true, would not it ? And Aunt Patty, you must stay and dine here, and keep me in countenance, and mind you back me up, you know, and explain to Spencer that it is not the custom to ask husbands without their wives in Dumbleton, and that it would give great offence. . It is all very well in London, but it would never do here—and with Selina, too !”

Not sorry to have an opportunity of judging for myself, how matters really were

between Sydney and her husband, I readily consented, and proposed that my little boy should take her notes, as well as one to Tom from me, explaining my unusual absence from home.

Mr. Hamilton did not return till late, and dinner was announced, before he made his appearance in the drawing-room. As soon as he entered, Sydney said in a rather nervous voice—“I have persuaded Aunt Patty to stay and dine here, Spencer. She has been kind enough to spend the day with me.”

A slight frown, contracted Spencer’s fine broad forehead as she spoke ; but he received me with decent civility, and offered me his arm at once. The conversation during dinner was confined to general topics. Sydney discoursed fluently of the beauties of Midsummer Verney, and the charms of the country. I eagerly listened, and asked

questions, in order to keep up the ball of conversation. We spun out to its finest extent, any topic that was likely to preclude the discussion of the much-dreaded dinner party. Mr. Hamilton spoke little, and appeared to be in a state of complete abstraction. It was not till the dessert was placed upon the table, and Fullinger and his attendant satellites had retired, that Spencer suddenly looked up, and enquired if Sydney had seen Lady Venetia that morning.

“Yes,” Sydney replied, “she came here, and so did Lady Diana Hartland and Mrs. Bowyer Dawkins.”

“Did they give you my message?” asked Spencer. “It seems likely that Templecombe may easily be persuaded to retire from the contest. He is so in love with Die, that it goes against the grain with him to oppose her brother-in-law, I suspect; and,

besides, he has not the shadow of a chance of success. So Via suggested getting him and his brother to dine here, and Beaumont and I can talk him over very soon.”

“She did tell me, Spencer, and I wrote to Mr. Beaumont and Mr. Auriol—they both accept.”

“And Broke? Is he coming? I find Templecombe comes, so I suppose his brother will do the same.”

“Well! to tell you the truth, Spencer,” said Sydney timidly, “I have not asked Mr. Broke yet. I don’t think he would come without his wife; and you know it will make so many ladies if we ask Selina, unless we have Mr. Hatfield too.”

“But that will make such a large party, and I think it would bore Via rather, to have all the curates in the parish. Why can’t you ask Broke alone? He

is not obliged to come, any the more for that, after all."

"You see, Spencer, it is rather difficult for me to ask Mr. Broke without Selina. She has always been my great friend here, and it would seem so odd of me not to ask her; and, besides, I know he makes it a rule never to dine out without her."

"He is not much loss," said Spencer, with some contempt; "he is a horrid little prig, and she is the greatest fool I ever came across. Still, Templecombe would like to have them asked, I suppose. You had better send a note off at once and ask them both then; and I suppose we must have that other fellow, 'the athlete,' as Via calls him, to make the number even. It will be a heavy party, but it can't be helped. If I had only known, I could have asked a man or two, to come down from London, but it

is too late for that now. I fancied Via would have settled it all with you this morning, or I should have called in again on my way to the station and told you about it.”

“Oh! I wish you had, Spencer! I do so wish you had,” cried Sydney. “It would have been so much better.”

“I really don’t see why it would have been better than Via coming herself,” said Spencer, looking surprised. “She knows a great deal more about getting up a pleasant little dinner than we do—either of us—and it seems to me, we have made rather a mess of it now. She won’t care to come here again, I am afraid; but I hope that if ever she does, she will ask all her people herself, and get a more promising set together. There! There! child, don’t begin to cry about it. She is so good-natured, she won’t

mind being bored for once, I dare say. You can't be expected to be a second Lady Venetia Verney, you know; and I am not angry with you, you little goose! Come, write to your Brokes, and don't look so woe-begone, pray. It will do better than we expect, perhaps. Via and Die can make anything go off well."

"Lady Diana is a very old friend of yours, is she not, Mr. Hamilton?" said I, as Sydney retired into a corner to wipe her eyes and write her note, after we had returned to the drawing-room.

"Die Hartland! Oh! yes, of course Die is the same as a sister to me, every bit. There's no difference. I have lived with the Osterleys ever since I can recollect almost. I was left an orphan when I was a small boy—not old enough to go to school—and my uncle, old Lord Osterley, took

me into his house, and always treated me like a child of his own—till—till—I should say—till I grew up,” continued Mr. Hamilton, becoming a little confused. “He was an ill-tempered old fellow—an implacable kind of dog—and was never known to forgive anyone who once offended him. Well, I did once offend him, and he turned me adrift directly, and never spoke to me afterwards.”

“Oh !” cried Sydney, “how dreadful. Did you do something so very bad ?”

“Bad ?—no, it was nothing wrong, but only something foolish—never mind what it was, now. It’s all over and past ; but old Osterley has been the ruin of me—body and soul. I might have been an ambitious man, and a hard-working man, and an honest man, and a rising man at this moment, if he would have let me. As it is, I am nothing—and care for nothing.”

“Oh! Spencer! I am sure you are hard-working, and honest now,” said Sydney indignantly. “I don’t know about ambitious, but I am sure you are a rising man—everybody says so.”

“Do they?” said Spencer with a scornful laugh; “then that’s all they know about the matter. I know better—to my cost. What was I saying? Oh! that Via and Die were the only sisters I ever had—and whatever their father may have done, they never forsook me—they have been, and always will be, my best friends. If you wish to know how to please me, Sydney, you will always consult Via and Die. They understand me thoroughly, and, to my mind, are different from all other women. There’s no one to be compared with them. Don’t look so injured, Syd. You are a good child enough, but you never can be such a woman as

Venetia is. It's not likely, and of course I don't expect it of you. So don't fret about that. Now I shall go and smoke a cigar in the garden.”

Poor Sydney was, I saw, much hurt at this selfish, egotistical speech ; but not knowing what to say, I ended by saying nothing at all, and soon after took my leave.

CHAPTER XV.

LOVE ME, LOVE MY DOG.

“For my part, I do wish thou wert a dog,
That I might love thee something.”

SHAKESPEARE.

I COULD not help feeling very anxious about my poor Sydney and her party, and I believe I enquired into the matter so thoroughly, that I can tell you all about it, almost as well as if I had been there myself.

Lady Venetia and Miss Verney were the first arrivals.

Her Ladyship was attired with the most exquisite simplicity in white muslin, over blue satin, and covered with lace, that must have cost a fabulous sum of money ; she also wore a very becoming little cap, or head-dress, of old point. “ Well ! ” she exclaimed as she came in ; “ here we are, you see ! I came early to protect this poor darling from Mrs. Bowyer Dawkins. She is a formidable creature to encounter alone, is she not, Childy ? But why have you made yourself so fine, with your silks, and your satins, and your flowers, and your trinkets ? See ! I have only just put on a plain, white muslin-gown. Shall I remind you that beauty is ‘ when unadorned, adorned the most.’ Spencer, why do you let the dear child dress herself such a figure ? I thought *you* would have known better, at all events. She is not going to a Lord Mayor’s

feast, remember, but only receiving two, or three, of your relations at home. Now do run upstairs and take off that dreadful wreath, won't you?—just to oblige me!—there's a good little thing!—and put on a nice, clean, white gown—I know you have plenty—just like mine. Spencer, don't you agree with me? Exert your influence, and persuade this pretty, little wife of yours to study the art of simplicity. It's quite one of the fine arts. Why you are not angry, you foolish pet? You must not mind my giving you a little good advice, you know. I mean to take *such* pride in your first appearance in London, and I really must insist on your letting me take the entire charge of your dress. I am reckoned rather an adept in that accomplishment, am I not, Spencer?"

“Lady Venetia Verney is well known to

be invariably the best dressed woman in London. No one has such good taste. I am sure it will be too kind of her, if she will give you a little advice now and then, Sydney, for I really cannot undertake to superintend my wife's wardrobe. And you are shockingly over-dressed to-night—that is evident to the meanest capacity. Run up and put on something less vulgar-looking if you can. There's plenty of time if you make haste."

More to gain an excuse to hide her tears of mortification, than for any other reasons, Sydney turned hastily away, and went to change her toilette, but while lighting a candle, she could not help overhearing Lady Venetia say, in a low voice—"Poor child! now she will hate me for ever!—but for *your* sake, Spencer, I must take some pains to make her look a little like a lady. With

the awful example of her mother before us, we must insist on her learning not to look like the city dames of Dumbleton."

"You know, Via, how intensely obliged to you I shall always be, for any kindness that you can show to my poor, little, ignorant, unsophisticated wife. Make her as like yourself as you possibly can. That is all I ask."

When Sydney returned, dressed in regulation simplicity (and looking, I have no doubt, all the prettier for the bright flush which haste and anger combined, had called to her cheeks), she found that the Brokes and Mr. Auriol had arrived. Selina was arrayed in glorious attire, and was in one of her most gushing moods.

"Late! Late! so late!" she cried, holding up her finger reproachfully at Sydney, as she re-entered the room. "And so you have

grown too fine a lady to be ready to receive your guests. Fie—fie, Mrs. Hamilton, this will never do.”

“ I have been down before, Selina,” replied Sydney. “ I only went up to fetch something. I am so glad you were able to come on so short a notice.”

“ Ah! we must excuse that sort of thing at first starting, and such old friends as you and I are, need stand on no ceremony with each other. I am only too pleased to be of any use to you by coming in at a moment’s warning, to assist you in entertaining Templecombe’s friends. I don’t suppose *entre nous*,” she added in a low voice, “ that Lady Die will ever marry him, and of course it is very much to our interest that he should continue to devote himself to her, instead of marrying anybody else; so I am quite thankful to encourage his very foolish *pen-*

chant in that direction. Is she not an odd creature! but I don't dislike her myself—on the contrary, I am very grateful to her for taking up all Tempey's attention. And I am very civil to her."

As she spoke, Lady Diana and Mrs. Dawkins entered the room.

"And so you are here before us, Via," said Lady Die. "I was afraid we should be late. I did not know what to do with Mr. Quilp — the waiters, stupid creatures! are all afraid of him, and I was in despair, for he howled and scratched so frightfully at my door, when I tried to shut him up there, that the landlady thought fit to remonstrate about her paint, and the gentleman below, sent up word he would not stay another hour in the hotel if that dog were not sent to the stables. Such a piece of work—and nothing would satisfy poor Quilp

at last, but coming with me in the fly. I have left him in the hall outside, lying on my opera cloak."

"Oh, nonsense! bring him in, poor fellow," cried Spencer; "he'll do no harm here. I'll call him in, shall I?"

"Oh, I don't think it will be of any use if you call him, Spencer. Mr. Quilp obeys no one but me. I'll fetch him myself. Now is not he the greatest darling you ever met with?" she added, as she came in with the misshapen monster in her arms. "Did you ever see such a beauty? I'll let you nurse him a little, Sydney, if you like. There, my pet, go and make friends with your new cousin. Yes, he takes to you; he actually likes you, Sydney. Spencer, Mr. Quilp approves of your wife, so I have no doubt whatever, that she will suit us all admirably. I always take Quilp's opinion before any-

body's; he is such a wonderful judge of character. Quilp never made a mistake in his life."

"I am delighted to hear that Sydney meets with the approbation of so important a personage," said Spencer, gravely.

"Oh, do let me look at him," cried Selina Broke, coming forward; "I wonder if he will like me too? Here, Quilp! Quilp! Quilp! pretty little doggie, zen! does it know who it likes and who it hates, zen? Was it a very sensible old fellow?"

Mr. Quilp, at this invocation, set up a most unmistakable growl, and proceeded to snarl and snap at Selina's pretty fingers with great zest and good will.

"No, no, you see, he does not like you at all," pronounced Lady Diana, decidedly "he can't bear you. How lucky you are not hurt. He bites rather sharply; I

would advise you not to touch him again. Quilp has evidently taken a dislike to you."

"I thought we settled not to have that tiresome little woman," added Lady Diana, as Selina retired in great discomfiture to the other side of the room, and took refuge with her husband, Sydney, and Mr. Auriol.

"So we did," said Lady Venetia. "How is it, Spencer?—we mentioned particularly that Mrs. Broke bored us to death, and we did not want her to come at all."

"Well, Sydney seemed to fancy Mrs. Broke would take offence if she were not asked, and she persuaded me to let her send her friend an invitation; but I was not aware, Via, that you had said, you did not wish her to come. Sydney ought to have mentioned that to me."

"Sydney knew better than to quote Via's opinion to you, evidently," said Mrs. Daw-

kins. "For my part, I think she is quite right to stick to her old friends, and to have her own way about asking them to dinner whenever she likes."

"I think Mrs. Broke a very silly woman," said Lady Venetia; "and if I were you, Spencer, I would not encourage Sydney in being so intimate with her. She is very second-rate, and gives herself the most ridiculous airs I ever saw. If you don't want to see Sydney turn into a second Selina Broke, put an end to their very silly, little, school-girlish friendship at once."

"I can't bear Selina Broke, and she hates me," added Lady Diana.

"And no wonder," said Mrs. Dawkins, "when she lives in constant dread of your marrying her husband's elder brother. She will hate you still more, whenever you do

marry Templecombe, if that is any consolation to you."

"It is almost a reason for doing it. But hush! here he is!" said Lady Diana, with a scarcely perceptible change of colour, as Lord Templecombe was announced, followed by Mr. Beaumont and Mr. Hatfield.'

In the confusion that ensued upon these fresh arrivals, Spencer took an opportunity of taking Sydney to task for not having mentioned to him that Lady Venetia had particularly specified that Mrs. Broke was not to be of the party.

"I can't think how you can have neglected to tell me this, Sydney, when you knew how anxious I was to make the evening agreeable to Via. It is a most unaccountable piece of carelessness; I cannot believe that it could have been otherwise than carelessness. It is quite impos-

sible that you would purposely and deliberately have invited a person to meet my cousin, who you were aware was disagreeable to her."

Sydney, repressing her ever ready tears with some difficulty, for she knew they would only make matters worse, protested that she thought it right to ask her old friend to dinner, and that she did not see what harm Selina could possibly do to Lady Venetia. Lady Venetia was not obliged to speak to her, unless she liked it.

Spencer looked as he felt, extremely angry, and there is no saying what little scene might not have ensued, had not Lady Venetia with her usual ready tact come to the rescue.

"Ah! now Spencer, I know you are scolding this poor child about that tiresome Mrs. Broke. I won't have you say another

word about the matter—either now, or at any future time. Remember, I have forbidden the subject to be ever alluded to again, in any way. Do you hear? It was quite a mistake, darling, was it not? and the dinner will go off beautifully in spite of everything, you'll see, Spencer. 'Trust to me for that;' and Sydney soon found herself following her guests into the dining-room, on Lord Templecombe's arm.

She was in a most uncomfortable and rather inexplicable state of mind. There was nothing in the world so terrible to her as to see Spencer angry, and with her; and yet, dreadful as that was to bear, she considered it infinitely preferable to being forgiven, through the intercession of Lady Venetia Verney.

That lady kept her word about making the dinner go off well. She had never been

more brilliant and enchanting; and Spencer catching a little of her spirit, also exerted himself to talk well and agreeably to all his guests. Mrs. Broke's little inanities were received as if they were the most witty and original remarks ever hazarded at a dinner-table. Mrs. Bowyer Dawkins, in her usual bitter, sarcastic manner, made mince-meat of all her most intimate friends in no time, though it might have been said of her, as of Mrs. Clackitt:—

“She generally designs well, has a free tongue, and a bold invention; but her colouring is too dark, and her outlines often extravagant. She wants that delicacy of tint and mellowness of sneer, which distinguish your Ladyship's scandal.”

Lady Diana talked about her dogs and her horses, and Lord Templecombe listened with the most enrapt attention to every

particular concerning those precious quadrupeds.

John Beaumont and Honour Verney sat next to each other, and appeared to find no lack of interesting topics—though they did not enter much into general conversation. But Nora, who was devoted to her uncle, was really interested in the election business, and John had not the slightest desire to speak to any other individual in the company. He despised fine ladies, and thought Lady Venetia tiresome, false, and affected, as he constantly assured me; and as for Lady Diana, he found her perfectly odious. The sisters were not, in John's opinion, worthy even to be compared to Miss Verney, or, as he expressed it, "ought never to be named in the same day" with that superior young woman.

For my own part, I always thought Nora

excellent, though a little dull, but I dare say she found John a pleasanter, and more congenial companion than she did me; at all events, he was the only person except her uncle, with whom she ever seemed to get on, very comfortably. She appeared shy and ill at ease with all other gentlemen, and even with most of us ladies, though Margaret and Agnes Auriol always assured me that Miss Verney had a great deal in her, and was a fine sterling character.

As for poor Wilfred Auriol, he looked, I understand, more like a martyr at the stake than a young man at a dinner party. He ate little and said less, but sighed heavily at intervals, throughout the painful ceremony, and turned up his eyes in devout horror, at the vast amount of nonsense that was talked by the majority of the company. I dare say, poor fellow! it would have been

a great relief to him if he had dared to cross himself occasionally ; but he happened to be sitting opposite to Lord Templecombe and Mrs. Dawkins, and did not venture to run the risk of attracting their attention by so unusual a gesture.

As for my poor dear Sydney—as she afterwards told me—she hardly knew what she did ; she felt so miserable at having made Spencer angry, and at seeing him talk so happily and gaily to Lady Venetia, while he looked so coldly, and spoke so carelessly to her. His merry laugh at every little lively remark of Lady Venetia's seemed, my poor child told me, to cut her to the heart ; and it would have been the greatest relief to her, if she had dared to give one good shriek of misery before the long, noisy dinner was at an end. But Sydney said she believed she contrived to keep her countenance tole-

rably well, and Lord Templecombe and Mr. Broke both talked so fast and so loud, that she hoped her silence was not much observed.

END OF VOL. 1.

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